# Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?

Blakey Vermeule

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BLAKEY VERMEULE

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*For Khedi and Terry,*
*with deepest love*

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He's my favorite fictional character
—*Homer Simpson, on God*

The idea for this book came to me during a graduate class I taught at Northwestern University in December of 2001. We were talking about J. M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace,* which had won the Booker Prize in 1999. This was a course in eighteenth-century fiction, and *Disgrace* was the last book on the syllabus. On the day we came to discuss it I felt mute. *Disgrace* is a staggering work, spare and raw. How do you begin to talk about it? It is probably best to start by simply admiring it. Thus the opening salvo came as a surprise. A student wanted to know why *Disgrace* was on the syllabus—indeed, why Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* and Jane Austen's *Emma* were on a syllabus whose only genuine eighteenth-century fictions were Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* and Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa.* I had already said that I thought *Disgrace* was an obsessive rewriting of *Clarissa,* an extended meditation on rape, on the will, on the problem of cruelty, on "fighting," as one of Coetzee's character puts it, "with death." I was strongly attached to this insight; my students were not. I took it as the basis of the day's seminar; they took it as a mildly interesting aperçu. They shrugged.

Flummoxed, I let the conversation take its own course. It settled angrily on the main character, David Lurie, a divorced middle-aged professor in South Africa who has an affair with a student and is forced to resign from his university by a cartoonish band of politically correct feminists. David Lurie provoked outrage in my students. What was his attitude towards women? Had he learned anything at all by the end of the book? Had he really improved or had he merely turned to art—composing an opera on the love life of Lord Byron—as a way of ducking his responsibility? Nobody got angry with the vapid student Melanie, who let herself be pressed—with what degree of willingness nobody can say—into his bed. Nobody cast a harsh word on the group of men who doused David Lurie with ethanol and set him on fire while raping his daughter, Lucy. Nor did they question the motives of Lucy's neighbor, Petrus, who possibly masterminded the at-

tack in order to get hold of her land. These attacks may have seemed like just retribution for David's sex with Melanie, an encounter that was "not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core" (Coetzee 1999, 25). Perhaps, in the minds of my students, the victims of South Africa's apartheid system deserved to be able to take revenge on their oppressors. Or perhaps the rapists were not real enough characters in the novel to have motives worth wondering about. Of course, Coetzee had set it up that way to make a complicated point about empathy and race, but the point seemed in danger of being lost in the thickening waves of angry judgment.

I didn't ask my students what they were thinking, though. Nor did I understand then that I could learn from the way they talked about this book. Instead I panicked. This was, after all, a graduate class. I felt obscurely that these students needed to be disciplined, and rather quickly, out of an obvious fallacy—not the all too common emotional fallacy of stripping the complexity out of a person so that he is easier to make sense of and perhaps dismiss, but the literary-critical fallacy of talking about a fictional character as though he were a real person. If my profession has a single rule it is that the distinction needs to be honored. The rule, often alluded to but nowhere exactly written down, is actually a concatenation of biases and preferences in favor of the complex, the difficult, the ineffable, and the mysterious. These preferences match up perfectly both with the mandate of literary professionalism and with the tastes of sophisticated literary culture as a whole. The highly literate distaste for people who too passionately identify with fictional incarnations has a distinctly anticelebrity feel to it. Wayne Booth, himself a sensitive connoisseur of these hard questions, put it well when he wrote: "We have seen that though most people practice what I am calling ethical criticism of fictions, it plays at best a minor and often deplored role on the scene of theory. It simply goes unmentioned in most discussions among professional critics" (Booth 1988, 25).

These preferences are a legacy of New Criticism, with its strong antipsychological bent. Though maligned, New Criticism still provides a template for our profession, especially for teaching. So when I needed to change the topic from the question of what David Lurie was really like, I did what anybody with my training would do: I turned to form. I turned, in fact, to a close reading of the novel's first sentence: "For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well" (1). A novel's first sentence is always worth thinking about. Not only does it suture us into the narrative, but it also sets a limit against which the rest of the art work struggles. Form is often simply a pattern of emphasis. In the first sentence of *Disgrace,* all those commas suggest breakage,

discord, and fracture—a back-swirling, second-guessing self-doubt. The sentence is also shot through with irony: he has, to *his* mind, solved the problem of sex rather well. But his mind is clouded and blind. Terrible events will soon engulf him, events that explode from a violent spark of sex, race, conflict over property, and the sacrifice of children. His life will blow apart and yet he stands there, like Oedipus, blind to his fate. What's worse, the author knows what is in store for David, and his knowledge is undoubtedly signaled in the run of breaking commas. It is surely signaled in the spare and grimly foreboding qualification "he has, to his mind . . . " The author is pushing him and us along with a little feather dusting of punctuation, telling us that he knows and that *we* know that he knows and furthermore that he and we *both* know that David doesn't know. So suddenly our worries are entangled and we need to interpret two intentions—one blind to what's coming, the other more fully knowing—running along together. The pattern of formal emphasis simply gives us more and better information while deepening the puzzle of what David Lurie is really like, what he really wants, and what he really thinks. Rather than helping us to climb out of the slough of gossipy despond, formalism simply gives us a better way of doing what comes naturally.

Another anecdote. One evening T. and I went down the street to eat dinner at our local restaurant. We go at least once a week and we always have the same waiter, a tall, young, quiet, sweet Israeli man. I brought the *National Enquirer* to read over dinner, a more than usually absorbing issue about Tom Cruise and other topics. The waiter started reading over my shoulder. He asked about an article on Kobe Bryant. Kobe Bryant is the Los Angeles Lakers star who was accused of raping a nineteen-year-old woman but who claimed that the sex was consensual. The article was about how his wife, Vanessa, stood by him through the crisis and about how they have since fallen back in love. True or false, it was completely delicious: Kobe Bryant had possibly committed a monstrous act but he now planned to be faithful to his wife—if he could beat the rape charge. I handed the magazine to the waiter—by this time several other waiters had gathered around. "He did it!" the waiter said, eyes gleaming. I said I didn't know, but for a moment we were all absorbed in that possibility, thinking it through. Later it struck me, how ordinary, how odd: a group of strangers suspending our mutual wariness to engage suddenly, totally, in the question of another person's soul.

Why do we care so much about people whom we have never met and never will meet? I call such people fictional characters, although I realize that definition stretches things. Kobe Bryant is not a fictional character like Sherlock Holmes or Tess of the D'Urbervilles. Yet he is no more real to me as a reader of the gossip press than they are. The major differences are these: Kobe Bryant's story was then

ongoing, the narrative unfinished, the ending unknown. I could potentially meet him someday. I believe the people in his story are real and suffering, which gives them extra pathos. The magazine Kobe is a stripped-out cartoon character, smoothed of his complications, the noise cleared away in favor of the signal and the signal grafted onto a familiar chart of moral highs and lows. Yet the very question of how the cartoon version relates to his ongoing identity is now part of what it means to think about him. His fictionality is just one more puzzle, and not an especially knotty or panic-inducing one, as it evidently was for, say, early consumers of popular culture, for whom the whole question was new and exceedingly strange.

Fictional characters come trailing many cognitive puzzles. Some are constant over time while others change. Yet for all their historical complexity, fictional characters stay the same in one respect: they are the greatest practical-reasoning schemes ever invented. We use them to sort out basic moral problems or to practice new emotional situations. We use them to cut through masses of ambient cultural information. Our eternally premodern brains have simply not caught up to the speed and complexity of the vast moving world—so we use them in place of statistics as tools to muddle through.

Evidence of their success lies in the fact that by the time these words are published, whatever contemporary examples I use to illustrate my points will have faded. Trying to hold onto one in particular is like grasping a handful of smoke. Kobe Bryant's misdeeds will be a dim memory, but somebody else—a new name and a fresh scandal—will have replaced him. The new names and stories, whether they are national or niche obsessions, will be just like the old stories. I am sure of this because they have been just like the old stories since the modern media were invented, in a stuttering way, in London in the final decades of the seventeenth century. The media use fictional characters because people are so susceptible to them. They sell magazines. They capture our attention. Or some aspect of them does: their gleaming iconicity, their hidden sorrows, their badly disguised self-interest, and their repentance. The media use them over and over again, the same stories, the same insights, to capture the human obsession with the same wide-scale human problems: sex, courtship, status, resource allocation, tribalism, trust. Fictional characters reflect the importance of what we care about.

Why do we care about fictional characters? The very short answer is gossip: we need to know what other people are like, not in the aggregate, but in the particular. The word *gossip* must here be shorn of any connotations of frivolousness, although not of its undercurrents of aggression. After all, both of my examples so far have concerned interracial rape—perhaps the hardest thing Americans (or

anybody else) can confront. Yet gossip covers both cases. Indeed, I will defend an unlikely view: the reasons that we care about literary characters are finally not much different from the question of why we care about other people, especially people we have never met nor are ever likely to meet. Fiction writers have devised powerful tools for sharpening and focusing our interest and for holding it intensely for a time. So have sculptors, painters, filmmakers, magazine publishers, television directors, and photographers. Their tools, and even the possibility of considering people we will never meet, are of very recent cultural vintage. Our minds are not. They are of ancient stock and have not been fundamentally altered by the increasing speed of cultural play.

The tools that artists use to prod us to care about the people they create run along the grain of our minds. If these tools did not—if they ran counter to our mental lives—they would not survive for long. They might flourish for a time, borne along by a sense of novelty and the pleasure people take in solving puzzles. Or they might become tools in the hands of a closed authoritarian system, kept alive by the collective faith of a few. The simplest reason that we care about fictional characters is that our minds have evolved that way. How we make sense of them is the topic of this book.

A final word about the book's argument. Literary authors exploit our need to indulge in gossip just as much as purveyors of fictional characters in other media do. Often literary and nonliterary media are difficult to distinguish in their devotion to, for example, chronic human hypocrisy or the snares and wiles of the marriage market. Like any other pieces of information, literary narratives compete for attention ("eyeballs," in current web speak) in the marketplace. They have accrued some powerful institutional advantages, such as being disseminated through school curricula or educational groups. (The City of Chicago began a program a few years ago in which the whole city was asked to read a book at the same time. The first book was Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird.*) They have accrued some powerful moral advantages as well, such as the widespread notion that art uplifts and heals the soul.

But literary narratives also wear cement shoes. They are slow in an age of speed. They require leisure in a harried world. They are subtle and indirect, often harder to absorb than primarily visual media. Producers and consumers of literary narratives know that they work in an increasingly minor form. I heard the American novelist Michael Cunningham, author of the 1999 bestseller *The Hours,* give a talk to some writing fellows at Stanford. *The Hours* had just been made into a movie starring Meryl Streep and Nicole Kidman. Michael Cunningham was enjoying more success than most fiction writers could ever dream of. Yet

he told the young writers, very matter-of-factly, that in the great maw of American celebrity culture, he was nothing. He said that these students could go on to become the most successful writers of their generation and they would still be more obscure than a third-string actor in a daily soap opera.

To make up for their disadvantages, literary narratives have long sought to corner a very specific market. They harvest not the bright leaves but the dark roots of our desire for social information, often delving deeper than any other medium. They swim in the deep end. And this gives them special claims on us. Or so I will argue.

Versions of the following chapters have appeared previously: "Gossip and Literary Narratives" in *Philosophy and Literature* 30.1 (2006): 102–17; "God Novels" in *The Work of Fiction: Cognition, Culture, and Complexity,* ed. Alan Richardson and Ellen Spolsky (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Press, 2004); and "Satirical Mind Blindness" in *Classical and Modern Literature* 22.2 (2002): 85–101.

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Soo Vermeule, Emily Vermeule, and Spencer Vermeule. I love you all very much, and the littlest frigates especially.

This book is dedicated to Terry Castle and to Cornelius Vermeule. Cornelius died on Thanksgiving Day, 2008. I deeply honor his memory.

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# *The Fictional among Us*

Our ears, our minds, our mouths, are stuffed with personalities.
*—Ralph Touchett, in Henry James, Portrait of a Lady*

Imagine you are an alien anthropologist from Mars. Your Martian masters send you to Earth to gather data about those featherless bipeds that have so successfully adapted to every ecological niche on their tiny blue planet. Martian anthropologists have been visiting Earth for decades, each with the same brief: identify the strangest, most inexplicable earthling practices and report back about them. One Martian anthropologist became famous several years back for studying the mystery of two-sex reproduction (Martians are clones—much more efficient). The answer was parasites: earthlings incur the costs of two-sex reproduction because Earth's complex organisms are locked in a deadly arms race with parasites, even at the cellular level. Two-sex reproduction sponsors enough mutations that parasites are somewhat thwarted.[1] Having read through all the back reports you are stumped. Martians are not competitive, but they do like to be original. You sense that the good topics are going fast, and you worry that you won't find anything left to study.

You are given drugs to guard against a psychotic break resulting from the overload of your neural circuits and sent down in your pod, and you crash in . . . Times Square on a Saturday night. The antipsychotics were a good idea because the crush of noise and lights is overwhelming, to say nothing of the crowds pressing in on you, the cold lively faces, the excited eyes, the hot breath. When you grow accustomed to your surroundings and are able to make your way through the jostling swarms of people, the first thing you notice is that information comes in waves and streams, flowing in every possible earthling medium—long strings of numbers flashing by, towering bright billboards with ten foot high words on them. Many streams converge at once: streams of people, streams of light, streams of numbers, streams of words. (You can't even fathom the lady pole

dancers and the dudes selling watches.) Slowly it dawns on you that there is a pattern: most of the high light-boards show faces, giant beautiful faces, open-mouthed and contorted with pleasure. The faces are taller than buildings and have liquid black or bright blue eyes. Stumbling into a newspaper stand you see the same pattern: rows and rows of faces, most of them beautiful, all of them animated, some—the rare scandalous ones—are blotchy, comical, and too large. A puzzle: why do people (or is it just the ones who live in an intensely consumerist society?) spend so much time absorbed in the faces of strangers? Why does information pool itself into people? What is so compelling about people's faces, their stories, the intimate details of their lives? Why are humans so utterly obsessed with one another?

The human symbol world is a giant reflecting pool. It breaks up the human form and projects it outwards in strange, inflated, distorted, partial shapes. Ludwig Wittgenstein famously wrote, "the human body is the best picture of the human mind." But perhaps human culture is the best picture of the human mind. What does the human symbol world's always moving, changing, colorful tableau of bodies, faces, eyes, mouths, hands, and legs tell us about the human mind? What does it tell us about the sorts of things that humans value?

From your studies you know that humans are intensely practical creatures. Their values are closely tied to the sorts of things they have reasons to do. The sorts of things they have reasons to do tend, on the whole, to nurture their interests rather than thwart them. In fact, in your first few classes you had to memorize something called "the formula of humanity": human values closely track human interests, even or especially when they seem to diverge wildly from those interests. You learned that one way to get a quick read on human values is to apply the formula of humanity by asking what interests these values serve.

Human interests are a strange profusion of drives and desires, and yet they cluster most intensely around human thriving. The trick is to remember that humans thrive in concert and in conflict. They thrive as individuals and groups, and perhaps even as a species, but thriving comes first to the individual human, radiating outwards to his family and associates, his clan, his demos, his polis. A very rough rule of thumb: a human cares most for the things closest to him, beginning with himself. His values spread out from himself, fading like ripples in a pond. A witty, if naughty, philosopher named David Hume mocked this rule of thumb by caricaturing it and attributing it to a harsh and exacting master he called "reason" ("'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger"), but you know that human emotions are if anything

more inclined even than human reason to follow the formula of humanity (Hume 1986, 463). Applying the formula of humanity to an individual human is the most straightforward way of telling the story of what that human cares about, but even that is not very straightforward. Humans do lots of things for reasons to which they are blind, and the stories they tell themselves about their values are often soaked with delusion.

But soon you grew weary of the formula of humanity. You found that actual humans *strongly* resisted telling the story of their lives in this way. And when you tried to make sense of the higher reaches of culture, especially lofty monuments of altruism and achievement, the formula of humanity proved a grossly uncertain guide. Still your teachers insisted. Your final project for the class on human values was to analyze St. Peter's Church in Rome according to the formula of humanity. You claimed—albeit unsuccessfully—that they had given you an impossible assignment. Human ideals are notoriously difficult to map to their underlying interests (even when they are not set in marble and carved in the full glory of the baroque). They are elusive for several reasons. First is the powerful logic of non-zero sum-ness, a ratcheting force in human culture that dictates that any whole is vastly more valuable than the sum of its parts. (You gave as your example of non-zero sum-ness Botticelli, Ghirlandaio, and Michelangelo all painting frescoes on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.) Second, humans are powerfully invested in their ideals, so much so that even when they act in their own interest they often sincerely and loudly deny doing so. Non-zero sum-ness drives values relentlessly upwards, while a deep-seated idealism erases any visible signs of the interests underneath.

Knowing all this, you wonder if the hoary formula of humanity can help you now. What possible interests are served when humans hold up giant distorting mirrors to themselves? What practical advantage do these images serve? And for good measure, why is so much human information social information? What's even more puzzling is that most of the social information is about strangers. Other people flow in and out of consciousness like bubbles. The spotlight lights them up, and then, just as suddenly, they are gone. Humans reason through social information, and yet most social information seems to be ephemeral and of little use. In fact, most social information seems to be blindingly, dazzlingly pointless.

You feel that you have found your topic. But just to be sure that this is a topic, and thus something worth writing about, you take a new pill, a pill that allows you to experience human psychology from the inside, as though you had a

human brain. The phenomenology of social information: what a long, strange trip it is.

Take this book as the report to the committee.

Of course, it isn't just faces. The worldwide spread of the gossip press is astonishing, not just in cheap tabloids, but in the global reach of high-end glossy magazines, such as *Hello!* and *Okay!,* which pay millions of dollars for a story. We eagerly surround ourselves with cartoon demigods and then fill in the details of their cartoon demigod lives. These lives fall into predictable patterns: they are heightened and condensed, evacuated and retouched pictures of the sorts of things we care about in our fellow humans—their health, wealth, beauty, status, possessions, relationships, happiness, and more importantly, the degree to which they are more or less successful than we are in achieving those things.

The market in images of strangers is enormous, and yet resisting it is part of the game. Celebrities grumble that they have no privacy. Intellectuals grumble that the spread of gossip feeds the consumerist beast. Moralists grumble, as Adam Smith famously did, that we deify the rich and the beautiful: "The disposition to admire, and almost to worship, the rich and the powerful, and to despise, or, at least, to neglect persons of poor and mean condition, though necessary both to establish and to maintain the distinction of ranks and the order of society, is, at the same time, the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments" (Smith and Haakonssen 2002, 72). Psychologists grumble about the uptick in misery: by barraging us with images of people who are fitter, richer, and more beautiful than we are (and also, alas, than our spouses), the media keeps us dissatisfied and hungry for things we can't have (a lack we fill by buying the products sold by their advertisers). Reactionaries grumble that addictive stories loosen social norms. While driving in Auckland recently I listened to a radio show in which the host asked his listeners to call in with their most plausible conspiracy theories. One very disgruntled gentleman called in to say that New Zealand's long-running and massively popular soap opera *Shortland Street* was designed to brainwash the country into accepting lesbian marriages and to undermine traditional New Zealand social values (although whose interests this would serve he didn't say). But resistance is futile. The gossip market thrives because it gives people what they want—access to fame, beauty, youth, money—and to make it all go down more smoothly, heaping doses of Schadenfreude.

Any tabloid reader quickly learns that bad things *never* happen to good people. A movie star may now be battling a mysterious blood disease, but, if you've been keeping up, you know it serves her right for snatching her hapless

husband away from his first wife, who looks, in carefully staged photo-ops, about as able to defend herself as a newborn fawn. Another celebrity may have lost her business, her partner may have walked out on her, but she should never have let her weight balloon to three hundred pounds, gotten a crew cut, started wearing men's clothes, and allowed that hideous to acne break out along the line of her lantern jaw. But good things also never happen to cowardly people. Once the movie star starts to recover, as she inevitably will, she will be heralded as "brave." Her long struggle will wipe clean her moral slate.

Stories like these are utterly common. We absorb them in the supermarket checkout line. They come in several varieties: she—whoever she is—turns out to be a sleazy drug addict, a man-stealer, or the sort of person who sticks a knife in the back of her best female friend just when that friend has been diagnosed with a horrible disease. She is a monster of fascination, somebody so wealthy and powerful that she rides roughshod over conventional rules and over people's lives until some especially venial transaction—say a little insider stock trading—ruins her reputation and renders her, temporarily, an object of universal scorn. One gossip website (allegedly) rakes in several million dollars in advertising revenue a year simply by publishing photos of celebrities looking ugly, fat, dowdy, drunk, or drugged.

Call them wheel-of-fortune stories, tales of sudden reversals and comedowns of high-status people. They are likely to be paired with stories of sudden windfalls—lottery winners, families reunited after years of separation. The wheel of fortune is not a large mechanical instrument but a psychic stew of revenge and resentment. The star of a wheel-of-fortune story either flaunts her success or falls down a few pegs, over and over again. Wheel-of-fortune stories are remarkably effective tools to think with; readers can "get them" very quickly. Shallow and trivial, they are designed for quick absorbing and forgetting. The characters change but the plot stays the same. Schadenfreude stories are bargain-basement sublime: they deliver a feeling of safety, cheapened a little by repetition, but not much. There but for the grace of God go I.

Such stories have been a staple of the popular press since the popular press was invented in seventeenth-century London. Frances Burney's wildly successful 1778 novel *Evelina* borrows heavily from popular stereotypes, staging a running battle between a coarse and loutish English sea captain, an irascible John Bull Captain Mirvan, and his raddled nemesis, Madame Duval, an elderly English woman who has lived in France for many years and morphed into a ridiculous affected hybrid of French mannerism and English lower-class vulgarity. Physical violence breaks out between them: the captain arranges to have the elderly woman kidnapped

from her carriage; she falls in the mud, loses her wig, and tears her dress to the general mirth of the other characters, including her rather prudish granddaughter, the novel's heroine. This seems a little rough by the standards of polite literature. The early English novel sometimes seems to be a battle over which comic, pornographic, or scandalous materials will bubble up from the popular stews and take over the form. Indeed, much of the "rise of the novel" criticism in the past few decades has sought to distinguish—although nobody ever quite puts it this way—what competitive advantage literary narratives have over other kinds of information in the marketplace (I will try to answer that very question).

But at least as far as Schadenfreude stories go, the novel was a rather spectacular failure. Eighteenth-century novels are full of sad, crude little experiments in Schadenfreude: crude because they are micromanaged at the level of characters' reactions, and crude, too, because they fail to track the increasingly intimate emotional attentions on which Schadenfreude depends. So with *Evelina:* whatever mild pleasure we might take in the broad buffoonery and mock epic battles between Captain Mirvan and Madame Duval dissipates the more these scenes are repeated. Some pleasure may be had in the sight of Madame Duval lying in a muddy ditch with her dress torn and her curls falling off in large coils after two assailants ambush her. So too, some pleasure may be had in Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* from seeing Parson Adams running around with a piss pot on his head and urine flowing down his face—but not that much. Novelists should probably leave the tweaking of the French, the scorn of intellectuals, and violence against old women to the people whose stock in trade it has been for three hundred years—the chauvinist press.

Wheel-of-fortune stories have a much older provenance than Restoration London, stretching back through the roots of early European literatures. Their very antiquity may explain why they are familiar, but cognitive psychology is beginning to suggest the reverse: they are old and familiar because they are just the sorts of stories humans like to tell.[2] They are just the sorts of stories humans tell because they stimulate deep features of our social brains (Tiedens and Leach 2004) and (Ortony et al. 1988).

Steven Pinker wittily remarks that "when English-speakers hear the word *Schadenfreude* for the first time, their reaction is not 'Let me see . . . Pleasure in another's misfortunes . . . What could that possibly be? I cannot grasp the concept'. . . Their reaction is, 'You mean there's a word for it? Cool!'" (Pinker 1997, 367). That doesn't mean everybody is susceptible to such stories (although I certainly am). It does mean that they spread more easily than other kinds of stories—and sell more tabloids.

Why all this Schadenfreude? Part of the explanation may have to do with what the gossip market is for. Schadenfreude is an emotion rather crudely concerned with keeping one's self-regard intact in the face of the world's onslaughts, and even more crudely with meting out justice, with detecting and punishing rules-violators and cheaters. Sometimes it seems as though modernity is obsessed with hypocrisy, and all the literature that helps orient people to the modern world is especially concerned with this most ordinary of vices. Let me call all such stories gossip literature. Gossip literature means any insightful or exposing tale about other people in which the insight doesn't necessarily put the other people in the best light. In my view, most stories are gossip literature. The distinction, so carefully cultivated by literati and academics, between high and low, between popular and polite, pales beside the overwhelming similarity of gossip literature in all media. (I return to this point repeatedly in the pages that follow.)

How did modern life come to be flooded with gossip literature? Why are people so obsessed with the secret motives of other humans? The story can be told in several ways. I'll briefly tell one version of it now, and later I will tell other versions that, at least on their face, appear quite different. Let me begin with a basic story, one that is largely true. Britain in the late seventeenth century saw twin revolutions, one in finance and the other in information. The earliest full-blown information economy was tied to the English financial revolution. It was an information economy not in the strict sense that information could travel faster than people (as it could once the telegraph had been invented),[3] but in the sense that men and women became conscious for the first time of the effect of global trade on their economic interests. Adam Smith would later write that the Bank of England "acts, not only as an ordinary bank, but as a great engine of state" (Carruthers 1996, 3). By the state, Smith meant a central administration charged with enforcing contracts and obligations.

For many urban Britons, commerce was the engine of unprecedented social mixing, and they worried about extending credit to people they didn't know. They were at the leading edge of a trend. Modern culture has made trusting strangers a daily trial, dilemma, and obsession. Every new technology sharpens the dilemma, making it both easier to trade with strangers and more difficult to trust them. So how have people responded? By flooding the airwaves with useless though fascinating information. Pseudo-information. Just when I think we must all be sated, someone offers a little more. I recently found deceiver.com. This website threatens with the slogan "Do as you say or we'll say what you do" (oh, and this applies to "famous people only"). Why?

This trend started with the rise of print culture in the late seventeenth century.

Publicly available social information suddenly became much more valuable. The news/novel matrix, so-called, was awash in characters, some invented, some caricatures, many familiar from older drama and pornography (Davis 1983). Even as the "problem of other minds" emerged in eighteenth-century moral philosophy, writers lamented the way a credit-based market system undermined the possibility of judging the characters of other people. A widespread shortage of coins in the early modern period gave rise to the well-known late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century persona of the "man of credit," whose word—and reputation—was his coin. But the credit economy, what Craig Muldrew calls "the economy of obligation," provoked certain anxieties. People doubted whether they could trust one another enough to navigate the tricky waters of a credit-based economy. Evidence of what he points to is readily available in Restoration writers like Aphra Behn, John Dryden, and a host of their followers, for whom "credit"—and indeed coinage—was a social and moral obsession (Muldrew 1998, 99).

Writers helpfully fed this obsession. In 1695 Abel Boyer published a large collection of character studies drawn from French and English moralists of the preceding two centuries. In the preface he suggests what these characters are for: "I could not to do better, than to recommend to your care and study the following characters of virtues and vices; the first, as a pattern, which you ought to propose to your imitation, and the others, as sea-marks which may serve to teach you to avoid those rocks and sands, against which so many suffer daily shipwrecks both in their fortunes and reputation" (Boyer 1695, 3). Boyer wants his readers to use his characters as rudders to steer clear of the shoals.

But are the shoals worldly or spiritual? Boyer wants his readers to orient themselves to the growing sense of risk. Characters teach people when and how to give and withhold their trust. A major historian of the fiction has made a similar claim about characters. According to Catherine Gallagher, modernity requires skeptical and flexible habits of mind, habits that the early novel helped to form. "The early novel's thematic emphases on gullibility, innocence deceived, rash promises extracted, and impetuous emotional and financial investment of all kinds point to the habit of mind it discourages: faith. The reckless wholeheartedness of its heroes and heroines, their guileless vulnerability, solicits our affectionate concern and thereby activates our skepticism on their behalf." So in *Pride and Prejudice,* if we suspect that George Wickham is like Byron—mad, bad, and dangerous to know—well before Elizabeth Bennet does, our alarm on her behalf translates into a heightened watchfulness on our own behalf as well. "Such flexible mental states are the sine qua non of modern subjectivity. Everyone seemed to benefit

from them" (Gallagher 2006, 346). Why? Because being watchful, skeptical, flexible, detached, and ironic allows us to speculate in a range of markets, from the marriage market to the stock market to the insurance market, trusting just enough in the guidance of invisible hands to believe that the market is fair while inoculating ourselves against frauds, tricksters, and cheats.

Gallagher tells a fascinating story about how large-scale changes in economic and social conditions can require new or different habits of mind—habits that people can come to resist or resent. Her story makes sense of many strands of literary history. Of course, the story has its countercurrents and eddies, too. The rise of market psychology has not yet killed off the human capacity for magical thinking! When David Beckham was captain of the England football team, his portrait at the National Portrait Gallery was regularly defaced whenever his team was playing badly. Conversely, during the World Cup, people laid flowers at the feet of his wax image at Madame Tussaud's, tears streaming down their faces. Surely this is magical thinking untroubled by ironic self-distance.

This is one version of the story of the rise of gossip literature, though very short. I will revisit it, but now I want to critique the story I have just told. For a story can be true and still be missing some parts. This one is too historically particular. It fails to recognize how underlying human psychological biases—biases shaped by our evolutionary heritage—allow gossip markets to thrive. Humans have evolved psychological capacities that shape cultural forms at least as much as, and probably much more than, they are shaped by them. Ten years ago such a statement would have been grossly contentious. Now it has (almost) passed into the realm of academic lingua franca because, in the last twenty years, we have seen an explosion of activity in evolutionary psychology and cognitive science. Ranging from the hard to the social sciences, from neurobiology to anthropology, linguistics, and economics, the mind sciences are unified in the belief that the mind and consciousness are subject to some biological constraints. These constraints also explain some cultural patterns. The whole movement takes a "mind first" approach to culture.

In this instance, the spread of markets intensified a strong human preoccupation with conscience—Who has it? to what degree? Who lacks it and why? The rise of print capitalism secularized this worry and made it a matter of self-preservation. Keeping track of other people's inner compass became a necessary and rather anxious pastime, a need both created and fed by the way print capitalism personalizes and anthropomorphizes the information it circulates. But the interest itself is genuinely universal. It did not begin in the eighteenth century, or in the fifteenth, or in the fifth century BCE. It arises from the deepest reaches of

our social beings and the way we regard one another. A cognitive dimension is missing. When we fill it in, most stories about cultural change, including the well-known one I have just told, will come to seem part of a different story, namely, the way that cultural forms adapt to fulfill deep psychological imperatives, on the one hand, and changing economic and historical incentives, on the other.

We humans are commonly said to have "a God-shaped hole" in our souls. If you are a religious person, you can explain the hole by saying that God put it there in order to make it easier for us to receive Him. If you are a naturalist or an atheist, you believe the God-shaped hole is in our minds, not our souls. You then look for reasons that the concept of God might have evolved in our species. I think that we have a gossip-shaped hole in our souls. That gossip-shaped hole in our souls is actually quite large—maybe an ozone layer–sized gossip-shaped hole. In fact, the gossip-shaped hole in our souls certainly overlaps with the God-shaped hole in our souls. A scene in Virginia Woolf's 1929 novel *Mrs. Dalloway* explores this idea quite beautifully. Clarissa Dalloway is startled to hear a car backfiring, a noise that sets off a chain of associations:

> The violent explosion which made Mrs. Dalloway jump and Miss Pym go to the window and apologise came from a motorcar which had drawn to the side of the pavement precisely opposite Mulberry's shop window. Passers-by who, of course, stopped and stared, had just time to see a face of the very greatest importance against the dove-grey upholstery, before a male hand drew the blind and there was nothing to be seen except a square of dove grey.

The withdrawing male hand, the square of dove gray—somebody powerful retreats behind the curtain, leaving an instant void into which rumor quickly flies:

> Yet rumours were at once in circulation from the middle of Bond Street to Oxford Street on one side, to Atkinson's scent shop on the other, passing invisibly, inaudibly, like a cloud, swift, veil-like upon hills, falling indeed with something of a cloud's sudden sobriety and stillness upon faces which a second before had been utterly disorderly. But now mystery had brushed them with her wing; they had heard the voice of authority; the spirit of religion was abroad with her eyes bandaged tight and her lips gaping wide. But nobody knew whose face had been seen. Was it the Prince of Wales's, the Queen's, the Prime Minister's? Whose face was it? Nobody knew. (Woolf 1990, 12)

The spirit of religion and the spirit of gossip: are they the same spirit? God has withdrawn behind his blind, and so his presence spills out into the streets as rumor. Now the spirit of religion is abroad. She may be blind and gaping, but she

is powerful nonetheless. She imposes "stillness upon faces which a second before had been utterly disorderly." The spirit of religion, and the God she serves, organize people and give them meaning.

Information technology has done its bit to feed the gossip-shaped hole in our souls, but the hole is a ravenous beast, growing bigger and hungrier the more it is fed. Now it has grown so enormous that all the "tittle-tattle of Highbury," to recall a phrase from Jane Austen's *Emma,* will not fill it. But all this mindless gossip—Why do we waste even a flicker of a ghost of our attention on some transient it-girl or fleeting hottie?—may be fulfilling an important higher function. The function—you must allow me to speculate—may simply be to help us overcome the massive specialization that is a rather sad psychological effect of the capitalist enterprise (i.e., that we're all finally bowling alone). We are all subject to the fate that Adam Smith predicted for us. Knowledge and techne have become so specialized that even the most ardently curious polymath cannot have more than the most fleeting contact with the rest of the learned world. We are pin makers who know only the size and shape of our own pins.

In this context, gossip—even about those we never meet—allows us to make some kind of sense of the mad flow of history. Robin Dunbar, an evolutionary anthropologist, has famously proposed that human gossip is like grooming in other primates: a pleasurable way of nursing social bonds. As human groups increased in size, physical grooming became more difficult, so humans began to vocalize in order to accomplish the same things—providing emotional support, building alliances, creating feelings of well-being (Dunbar 1966). If you buy Dunbar's hypothesis, the gossip-shaped hole in our souls was filled by language. Now we stuff ourselves with every imaginable kind of information, much of it totally irrelevant, just because we can.

We humans spend a great deal, perhaps most, of our energy seeking to explain ourselves and other people. Why we do it and how we do it are two of my major topics in this book. They fall under the general rubric of what is called "mind reading," or "mentalizing." I also have a third major topic, which falls under the rubric of my own specialty, literary criticism—namely, the light that some literary narratives throw on this peculiar human capacity and the tools they have come up with to massage it. Over the course of their history, literary narratives have come to specialize in giving and withholding just the kind of information we crave. Although they can hardly compete—in speed, in outrageousness, in visual interest—with the spine-tingling juice of the popular press, literary narratives offer other compensations: depth and doubt, complexity and shadow, and what my students persistently identify as the capacity to make us think. Literary

narratives probe us and make us worry about just what it is to interact with fictional people. And we should worry, because interacting with fictional people turns out to be a central human cognitive preoccupation, one that exposes many aspects of how our minds work.

What a peculiar preoccupation it is, especially when the people we care about turn out not to exist—or at least not to exist in any way that we could ever realize. Caring about anybody takes energy, and when we care about fictional people, the costs seem unlikely ever to be recouped. Why should we spend attention on people who will never care about us in return? Why should we divert our attention away from people who might even pay us back one day? The reasons for not doing so seem obvious: any time that I spend absorbed in the goings on of some fascinating celebrity is time I am not tending to my own needs or the needs of my friends and family. How could that help me to thrive? Caring about strangers—not just strangers but fictional strangers—seems at best a waste of time and at worst a form of madness. It is the age-old problem of sympathy writ large for a greedy information age.

Then there are philosophical questions about just what it is to care about fictional characters. Sometimes these questions are ontological: what is the status of these peculiar objects that seem to refer to other objects in the world but that do not in fact do so? Sometimes they are epistemological: how do we know whether some fictional object truly refers to the world or does not? Sometimes the questions are about language: some sentences refer and others do not. Is there some logical way of telling the difference? But to my mind the question of questions, the one that presses most urgently again and again, is the ethical one that I posed in the last paragraph: what does it mean for people to expend sympathy on fictional characters when so many real people (and animals) deserve our rapt attention? To care means to be anxious and to exert mental energy. It means expending charity, even passion. These are not easy states to conjure. What, then, tempts us to spend mental energy on people we have never met and never will meet, on people whom we know to be fictional? What induces us to offer them our charity, to take care of them? Again, this is an old philosophical conundrum about altruism: the spirit is expensive and we tend not to waste it.

Part of an answer is that if we understand *how* we reason about fictional people, some of the mystery about *why* we do so will be solved. When we think about fictional people, two sets of issues are involved. The first has to do with how we make sense of other people, and the second with how we make sense of fictions. How we make sense of other people has sprouted a vast and ever-growing body of scholarship, and rightly so, because it lends itself to empirical

study. Meanwhile, the question about fiction has proven extremely tricky. For two centuries and more, philosophers have speculated, angry moralists have denounced, and, dare I say it, literary theorists have built angst-filled temples to the mystery.

But could they have done any differently? Ever since fiction first appeared as its own category in the eighteenth-century novel, it has played on the collective psyche of the Anglo-American world like the Norse God of mischief, Loki, the cunning trickster who changes into a bear or a horse or a fish at will. "Fiction is the formalization of our ability to say something without meaning it," says Brett Bourbon (personal communication). A great historian of fiction, Catherine Gallagher comes to roughly the same conclusion:

> From its common use to denote "that which is fashioned or framed; a device, a fabric, . . . whether for the purpose of deception of otherwise" (*Oxford English Dictionary* . . . ) or "something that is imaginatively invented," a new usage came into existence at the turn of the seventeenth century: "the species of literature which is concerned with the narration of imaginary events and the portraiture of imaginary characters; fictitious composition." As this sense of the word gained greater currency, mainly in the eighteenth century, an earlier frequent meaning of "deceit, dissimulation, and pretense" became obsolete. Although consistently contrasted with the veridical, fictional narration ceased to be a subcategory of dissimulation as it became a literary phenomenon. If the history of the word tells us anything, fiction seems to have been discovered as a discursive mode in its own right as readers developed the ability to tell it apart from both fact and (this the key) dissimulation. (Gallagher 2006, 338)

Since the eighteenth century, fiction has become narrowly linked to narrative. "Literary non-referential narrative" is how Dorrit Cohn defines it. Gallagher calls fiction a "discursive mode in its own right." All fiction requires is that some ordinary sense of reference be suspended. But even something so simple has its roiling edges. Fiction is a clever con artist, mostly benign but sometimes disruptive. When it is benign, fiction is a tool for delivering information and sensation as seamlessly as any other medium—film, print, painting, and so on. I think of it as a cultural force-multiplier. Once the burden of reference had been lifted, a massive wave of innovation was unleashed, cresting in the 1770s and 1780s, when book production rates suddenly soared.[4]

Does fiction have any special properties that distinguish it from nonfiction? I mean necessary properties, properties without which it is not fiction. Scholars have offered an astonishing number of opinions on that question, both pro and

con. I'll just cut to the marrow. The most convincing opinion on the yes side comes from the literary scholar Dorrit Cohn. In 1999 she published a book defending, as its title says, "the distinction of fiction." Why? Because the idea that fiction is distinct from nonfiction had been under serious attack for two decades. The attack had come from an unlikely quarter—poststructuralist theorists who were interested not in fiction but in nonfiction. These theorists tackled the truth claims of historical narratives by showing how biased, ideological, and selective they were with respect to evidence. So-called historical narratives were allegedly tainted, too, because they used such tactics from fiction as point of view, internal focalization, time-scale compression, and so on (Cohn 1999, 8–9).

Cohn resists this leveling impulse. Fiction, she claims, is uniquely suited to show us the "privacy of a character's consciousness." We should be alive to the "wonder of this singular experience"—the pervasive "mind-reading experience of third person novels" (though first-person novels work just as well for this, just in a slightly different way) (23). I believe that fiction evolved throughout the eighteenth century to give people ever more intense doses of "this singular experience"—the mind-reading experience.

Here's what's special or different about fiction. It imposes two stiff tariffs at the outset—two cognitive entry costs, if you will. First, it asks us to suspend our disbelief. Second, it asks us to give it the valuable gift of our attention. In exchange for these tariffs, fiction pays us back with large doses of really juicy social information, information that it would be too costly, dangerous, and difficult for us to extract from the world on our own. This is the basic bargain, which has been remarkably stable for more than two hundred and fifty years, even though both writers and readers of fiction have resisted its terms in clever, sometimes astonishing ways. Fiction makes its two demands—suspend for a moment your worry about being duped, and give me your attention—and once the reader agrees, she is rewarded with the most intense cognitive stimulation imaginable. What kind of cognitive stimulation? Social information. The deep truth about people's intentions—including, perhaps, one's own. All the material that is the subject of this book.

Literary theorists will undoubtedly reject the simplicity, or perhaps simplemindedness, of this approach. Ever since Lionel Charles Knights published his infamous attack on A. C. Bradley in a satirical pamphlet called *How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?,* any turn towards character, especially a sentimental turn, has seemed less worthy than focusing on language, on the unity of theme, on aesthetics. The founding gesture (or was it a sin?) of literary criticism may have been to suppress a psychological interest in character in favor of more diffi-

cult topics, a gesture born of the modernist reading practices with which the rise of criticism was historically twinned. Now, after decades immersed in this sin, literary theory has scoffed the question of why we care about literary characters into irrelevance and spun the question of how we read fiction into a topic of nearly theological complexity.

Since the 1950s, the tone of this theology has become increasingly dark, driven by formalism in French and American theory and by the linguistic turn in philosophy. In a famous essay, Paul de Man darkly endorses an opinion that literary theorists have held at least since Plato: "It is therefore not a priori certain that literature is a reliable source of information about anything but its own language." But de Man doesn't stop at a bemused admission that literature tends to confuse the issue of reference. He goes further, offering up what sounds suspiciously like a "bread and circuses" indictment of fiction: fiction so confuses people's sense of reality that it leaves us open to being swayed by powerful forces of ideology:

> It would be unfortunate, for example, to confuse the materiality of the signifier with the materiality of what it signifies. This may seem obvious enough on the level of light and sound, but it is less so with regard to the more general phenomenality of space, time or especially of the self; no one in his right mind will try to grow grapes by the luminosity of the word "day," but it is very difficult not to conceive the pattern of one's past and future existence as in accordance with temporal and spatial schemes that belong to fictional narratives and not to the world. This does not mean that fictional narratives are not part of the world and of reality; their impact upon the world may well be all too strong for comfort. What we call ideology is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenalism. (De Man 1986, 11)

All of this is certainly true, if extremely negative. I agree with de Man that "it is very difficult not to conceive the pattern of one's past and future existence as in accordance with . . . fictional narratives." Indeed, our brains work that way. I do not agree with him, however, that our fiction-loving brains make us especially vulnerable to ideology. Ideology is a complex system of norms and pressures that the powerful exert on the less powerful to advance their interests. The powerful are impatient, cunning, and strong. They use every tool they can to achieve their ends. A major tool in the arsenal is the evolved cognitive architecture of other human beings. That we are susceptible to fiction is simply not special in that regard.

But there is good news: fictional narratives are almost "too strong for comfort." The role of the theorist is to loosen the grip of fiction on our weakling

selves. Theorists have long fashioned themselves as crusaders against the pleasures and dangers of literary absorption, reacting suspiciously to the ordinary pleasures people take in fictional characters, replying to fiction's barbaric yawp with a stentorian no! But my own analysis may, in turn, be too harsh. Literary critics are no different from any other intellectual entrepreneurs: we all market explanations. The discipline itself derives from the Enlightenment, and the marks of enlightening and sloughing off the dark veil of superstition are everywhere in its writings. Literary criticism has been part of the same idea market as the literature it covers, and it has had to respond to the same ambient worries about fiction and credit. Once those worries set in and become widespread—and a reader of eighteenth-century fiction can see them spreading almost preface by preface and gathering force decade by decade—certain clichés take over as well. One such cliché, ever so slightly visible in de Man's dark diagnosis, is that while *other* people are likely to succumb to fiction's bright lure, the present writer is immune and therefore able to point out this aspect of human folly. Few writers seem to be aware that when they point a moral, they do so in company with thousands and thousands. "The bad news is that in today's freewheeling media environment, consumers seem increasingly unable to distinguish truth from fiction, news from polemic, reality from fantasy," writes a thoroughly belated commentator in the *Wall Street Journal* (Murray 2004). Entrepreneurs will find many ways to profit from the confusion: the May 17, 2004, issue of *People* magazine featured a cover story on the rash of reality TV shows that have become such a staple of American popular culture since the first *Survivor* episodes aired in 2000. "Just How Much of Reality TV Is Really Real?" the cover asked. A great question, but one that actually has changed very little since the early days of print culture.

De Man's skepticism is born of elite rather than popular taste.[5] Elite taste (by its own lights) favors the difficult over the easy, the complex over the simple, the far over the near. In fiction, elite taste favors the detached over the absorbing. One of the most infamous literary squabbles of recent years makes the point clearly: Jonathan Franzen, author of the 2001 novel *The Corrections,* versus Oprah Winfrey. Oprah chose Franzen's book as the monthly selection of her book club, but Franzen, with a rather deplorable lack of grace, declined the honor, saying in effect that Oprah's book club wasn't for serious readers. A few months later, Oprah, whose patronage of the publishing industry had done wonders for sales, shut down her book club altogether. The contest between Franzen and Winfrey was finally a contest of branding, cast as the age-old battle between art and commerce. During the road show for his book, Franzen noted several times that he

had majored in English at Swarthmore and that the experience had had a profound effect on his aesthetic.

I have heard this prejudice expressed at academic dinner parties many times as laughter at the gullible pilgrims who flock to the Lourdes of some writer, who dress up like his characters, who believe too strongly in his incarnation. The distaste has a distinctly anticelebrity feel to it, as though somehow there should be a qualitative difference between author worship and celebrity worship, as though Elvis worship is merely distasteful but Hemingway worship is undignified. Besides, there really ought to be something different at stake when the person is a writer. These sentiments crop up, too, in discussions of teaching. The furrowed brow, the worried expression: responsible teachers wean their students off their passion for literary characters or at least teach them how to think about them in a responsible way, leavening their passion with skepticism, dialectic, and appropriately aesthetic distance. Yet the more I think about it the more convinced I become that our profession thereby deprives us of access to one of the most powerful human imaginative capacities: the power and lure of fantasy. Indeed, I now think that the meaningful distinction between fictional and nonfictional characters is not ontological but technological. Our social brains are just as capable of being stimulated by fiction as our sexual selves are capable of being stimulated by pornography. We mostly overlook the fact that something is a representation unless the representation itself is a spur to greater stimulation.

What would be lost if we simply sidestepped the question of fiction's effects altogether? People can respond passionately to situations that they know are not true. They care passionately about people whom they have never met and never will meet. Nothing about this capacity seems especially mysterious. To describe it in rather technical language, our inference systems can run even when they are "decoupled" from "actual external input from the environment or external output in behavior" (Boyer 2001, 149). In fact, we run our massive inference systems in a decoupled mode all the time: when we consider what we would do in a hypothetical situation, when we entertain counterfactuals, when we have relationships with imaginary people (ibid.). What seems odd about decoupling is not that we do it but that sometimes we do it badly. So, for instance, I might pretend that the edge of my hand is a Ginsu knife, but if I try to use it to finely slice a tomato, I will end up with a counter full of red mush. In this example, I have decoupled the representation of my hand from experience and coupled it to a representation of a Ginsu knife. I have then failed to decouple that metarepresentation from its output in my behavior.

Decoupling is deemed to be an ordinary human capacity, one that appears on a predictable schedule as children develop and that first expresses itself as "reality-oriented play" (Leslie 1987, 412). Cognitive scientists are hotly debating the mechanisms that underlie pretense and the reasons we pretend at all. Formalists drawing lines and saying "here we can go but no farther" are not helpful. Perhaps we could simply bracket the intense formalist interest in how to determine the boundaries between the fictional and the real and turn to other questions instead—questions that may explain some of the energy that we humans expend on people we have never met and never will meet. Such as: How do we reason about other people? How do our built-in inference systems vary under different cultural and historical circumstances? Do some cultures—and products—encourage people to inadequately decouple? Certain commitments can perhaps prompt people to override their ordinary capacities for make believe—to imagine, for example, that the stage Othello really is trying to kill the stage Desdemona and to rush onto the stage to try to save her. Do some cultures encourage people to decouple but at the same time provoke in them an intense anxiety about decoupling? For example, anxieties about fiction appear throughout the printed records of eighteenth-century British culture, although they have their roots in the publishing culture that developed in London after the Restoration of Charles II. So a possibly apocryphal story about the village blacksmith who read Richardson's 1740 novel *Pamela* to the illiterate villagers of Slough (who in turn rang the church bells on her wedding day) circulated as part of a broader anxiety (including on Richardson's part) about whether people would take too much or the wrong kind of interest in fictional characters. And yes, this anxiety seems directly related to the rise and circulation of prose fiction within a newly robust print culture.

The real issue here, it seems to me, is that the emotional risk of being duped is very high. Are human beings innately endowed with the capacity to detect bullshit? That is a difficult, intense question. If we were so endowed in any straightforward way, a stunning range of professionals would have to find other jobs: confidence men, politicians, advertising executives, and makeup artists. Yet we worry a great deal about being taken in by fakery. Late twentieth-century Americans may be far *less* comfortable with fictions than eighteenth-century men and women were. That is because fiction now permeates every aspect of our cultural life. Most of the time it is benign, but from time to time the "fiction syndrome" breaks out in the culture like a rash. James Frey's drug memoir, *A Million Little Pieces* (2003), became a massive bestseller after Oprah chose it for her book club in 2005. The memoir recounted Frey's horrifying battles with his demons, his

long struggle to become sober, and his rejection of Alcoholics Anonymous and other twelve-step programs. But when Internet sites posted evidence that Frey had fabricated many of his anecdotes, a major media storm blew up. Oprah invited him back to her show to administer what the *New York Times* called a "public caning" (Richard Siklos, Feb. 5, 2006), and predictably, his sales went through the roof. Frey defended himself by saying that his fabrications "made a better story" (*New York Times,* Feb. 2, 2006). Recently readers won a lawsuit against Frey and his publisher, Random House, claiming fraud; Random House now has to offer readers a refund if they purchased the book before the date on which the publisher and Frey admitted that he altered key facts in his memoir (ibid., May 29, 2007). One thing this shows is that people are inordinately susceptible to labeling. Frey and Random House should have paid more attention to the experiment in which Paul Rozin and Carol Nemeroff gave adults two empty bottles and poured sugar into both. Then they handed the subjects two sticky labels, one marked "sugar" the other marked "sodium cyanide" and said they could put the labels on whichever bottle they wished. Subjects showed a marked aversion to drinking sugar water from the bottle marked "cyanide" (Rozin and Nemeroff 1990, 226).

Other examples raise different sorts of questions. Consider the case of *The Bridges of Madison County* (1993), the bestselling novel by Robert James Waller later turned into a movie. The hero of the story is Robert Kincaid, a handsome photographer for *National Geographic* who travels to Iowa to take pictures of the famed covered bridges. He meets a lonely and repressed Iowa wife, formerly an Italian war bride, and they fall passionately in love, but she chooses in the end to stay with her husband and children rather than run away with her lover. What made this book astonishing, in part, was that its readers simply refused to accept that it was fiction. National Geographic was so inundated by requests for interviews with Robert Kincaid that they were forced to print a statement denying that the "handsome and sinewy" Robert Kincaid had ever worked for the magazine. But perhaps sensing a marketing opportunity, they also put together a lush documentary about the lives of its photojournalists, with glowing references to the fictional character. Meanwhile Madison County, Iowa, features the novel prominently on its website as a tourist draw.

On the face of it these examples seem like opposites. In James Frey's case, people were willing to absorb themselves in the details of his story and to be inspired by his example, but when they discovered that some of the details were fictional, they suddenly and sharply rejected his authority and turned against him. In the case of Waller's novel, readers were told, sometimes several times, that

the characters were fictional, but they nonetheless persisted in trying to make them real. One study of reader responses to the novel found that the majority of a sample of readers described themselves as "swept away" by the novel—they felt that the characters were intensely real, and they identified profoundly identify with them. Moreover, those readers liked the novel more than the readers who merely found it an interesting tale (Thomas and Bass 1993). But perhaps these examples make the same point. People tend to be inspired by stories they believe to be real. They overattribute real existence to the stories they want to believe in. They massively punish conveyers of outright falsehoods.

These examples show how unstable the basic bargain of fiction really is, how fragile on many grounds. All of which raises a question: If the risk of being duped is so great, why does anybody agree to the bargain? Conversely, if the risk of being hurried away beyond what is emotionally and intellectually warranted is so great, why don't people demand iron-clad assurances that their energy is likely to be well spent? Finally, how do writers of fiction use techniques to intensify our inference systems when they run in a decoupled mode? These are difficult questions—and by no means do I believe that I have found all the answers—but they strike me as central to our caring about literary characters.

# *The Cognitive Dimension*

What happens when a mind, or something that looks like a mind, comes floating into our ken? It hails us.

I suppose it makes some difference exactly *what* hails us: Is it a person in front of us? Is it words on a page? Is it pixels on a screen? But the real difference is in how we respond. When confronted with pixels or words, we allow ourselves to be guided. Pixels or words on a page are a prop for our make believe (the language is Kendall Walton's) (Walton 1993). They take us along for the ride. Now going along for the ride is not a passive affair. To get on board, we have to use our imaginations. But I will try to show a bit later on that imagining-under-guidance almost certainly involves the same social-reasoning capacities that ordinary social interactions do. The fact that wacky combinations of thoughts can happen when we imagine (or let someone do the imagining for us) doesn't mean that all bets are off as far as the way we reason. Not at all.

Before I get to the props and how they work (or don't), let me backtrack a little to explore how we reason about people and why we are driven to do so. I am going to begin with some conceptual primitives and then work my way around to larger cognitive mechanisms.

The first conceptual primitive is animism. Human beings animate everything. The anthropologist Stewart Guthrie has written an excellent book on this cognitive habit, showing how it underlies religious experience: "We often see nonliving things and events as alive, especially if they move, make noise, or otherwise stand out from the landscape. We credit our environment with more organization and more organisms than it has. Humans see boulders as bears, flying pieces of paper as birds, and stuck drawers as willful. Other animals also animate the world: cats see fluttering leaves as prey, horses see blowing bags as threats, and dogs hear sirens as howls. Our shared inclination to animate, moreover, is a strategy rather than an accident. To call this inclination a strategy, however, is not to say it is conscious. In fact, it almost never is" (Guthrie 1993, 39).

Why do we animate? Or, in what amounts to the same thing, why do we an-

thropomorphize? Here is Guthrie again: "We anthropomorphize because guessing that the world is humanlike is a good bet. It is a bet because the world is uncertain, ambiguous, and in need of interpretation. It is a good bet because the most valuable interpretations usually are those that disclose the presence of whatever is most important to us. That usually is other humans" (3).

Animation is a mental habit that piggybacks on several other mental habits. The first is a general preference for social information over other kinds of information. Evidence of social selection is visible in the brain. Cognitive science has long established that the human brain selects for social cues earlier and more intensely than it selects for cues about the physical or numerate world. Newborn infants shown pictures of faces and pictures of blank or scrambled features are much more likely to respond to faces (Brothers 1997, 13). In fact, seven- to eleven-week-old infants seem to focus on the eyes rather than the mouth when a person is talking, suggesting that they are drawn to expression rather than simply to motion (ibid.). In 1998 Christopher Tyler announced an astonishing finding: he studied hundreds of portraits from a span of six hundred years and found that in over two-thirds of them, the vertical center line ran directly through one of the subject's eyeballs (Taylor 1998). The finding holds true in portraits as different as Picasso's *Dora Mar* and Leonardo's *Mona Lisa,* not to mention the family photographs on my desk. Before Tyler noticed this, nobody had ever articulated eye-centeredness as a deep principal of portraiture, but it fits with the human preference for social information and eye contact as vehicle of that information.

Face recognition is just a tiny part of the whole picture. Social specialization affects every part of the brain, from individual neurons to complex regions. It affects very general psychological processes: "concept representation, rules of inference, memory, 'hot' cognition, and automatic processing" (Kunda 1999, 7). The human love for social information affects all areas of practical reasoning. It shapes cognitive heuristics, biases, and failures in judgment. It sets palpable limits on rationality. Researchers from a host of disciplines have begun to answer the question of "how the primate brain handles social cognition" (Brothers 1997, 56).

Agency is a related conceptual primitive. We see something propelling itself, something directing itself towards a goal, and we think it has a self, that it has intentions. We interpret "a moving object as if it were motivated by a rational goal. No matter what the object—be it a person, a dog, an amoeba, a triangle, or a billiard ball—if it moves by itself, we treat it as an animate agent with its own set of goals" (O'Connell 1998, 39). Our intentional stance is part of a widespread tendency towards psychological charity, which we direct towards a range of living

creatures. In fact, we are so psychologically charitable that we barely pause to consider what sorts of risks our charity exposes us to. Daniel Dennett makes the point nicely: "Every time we venture out on the highway we stake our lives on the reliability of our general expectations about the perceptual beliefs, normal desires, and decisions of other motorists" (3). But risk assessment is probably the reason this tendency evolved in the first place. For sound evolutionary reasons our basic level of agency-attribution is set rather high. Far better to overattribute agency to potential predators than to underattribute agency and run the risk of complacently getting picked off—better to take that rustling in the grass seriously than to blithely let yourself get mauled (39).

*Agency,* however, is too unspecific; perhaps a better word is *person.* Leslie Brothers, a cognitive psychologist, uses her findings in brain science to give a philosophical account of what a person is, an account that will serve as my own baseline: "'Person' is a higher level perception of bodies, a perception that endows them with mental life. We endow bodies with mental life in the same way we endow the sights or sounds of words with meaning, which is what gives them their semantic, as opposed to their phonetic, dimension. Because of the way our brains work, our perception of 'person' is automatic. It is an obligatory part of our experience of others—and ourselves" (Brothers 1997, 3). The concept of person, basic and irreducible, gives rise to the idea of mental life. From this logical primitive the ideas of agency, of authorship, of ownership, of selfhood, and of being flow.

Yet the concept of person is incomplete without immersing it in a wider social world. Leslie Brothers explains that "there is another dimension to the concept 'person'—a person always belongs in a network of persons, a network that has been termed the 'social order.' The social order is intrinsically moral, for it is made up of shoulds and oughts, triumph and shame, villains and heroes. Personal behavior in this moral-social order is interpreted in terms of reasons and shifting status" (ibid., 4). The glue that binds persons into the social order is narrative—or, really, narratives—"about good and bad, heroes and villains," as the novelist Ian McEwen puts it in his 2001 novel *Atonement.* Brain science has shown in spectacular fashion that humans cannot reason or even think without emotion—indeed, without narratives (Damasio 1994).

The human intellect is extremely well-suited to thinking about other people, their problems, and the situations they get themselves into. The problems we care about come packaged in human form. Other people set our puzzles of practical and moral reasoning for us. We think about most things—facts, values, norms,

history, morality, society, even our own fates—by bundling them up into figures and stories about other people. To reason practically about the world, to set our caps for it, we personify many of its elements.

Personification takes advantage of several human cognitive predispositions and heuristic biases. In general, these heuristic biases can be classified under the idea of representativeness. Representativeness is the tendency, "when judging the probability of some uncertain event," to "resort to heuristics, or rules of thumb, which are less than perfectly correlated (if, indeed, at all) with the variables that actually determine the event's probability" (Bar-Hillel 2001, 69). A major example is that people tend to ignore base-rate information when presented with compelling individuating information. Base rates refer to the overall proportion of something in a sample or population. But even when people know what the overall rates are, they ignore them in favor of what might be called the falsifying personal inference. Here is a rather famous example:

> Imagine there is a roomful of people, 70 percent of whom are lawyers and 30 percent of whom are engineers. One is a man named George who dislikes novels, likes to do carpentry on weekends, and wears a pocket protector in his shirt pocket to carry his pens. His own writing is dull and rather mechanical, and he has a great need for order and neatness. What is the probability that George is (A) a lawyer or (B) an engineer? Most people tend to ignore the base-rate information, which suggests that George is a lawyer (70 percent of the people in the room are lawyers). Instead, they give too much weight to the individual information, which is highly salient and declare that George is likely to be an engineer. This error, called the base-rate fallacy because people tend to ignore mathematical proportions (of lawyers, in this sample), violates mathematical formulas by which base rate and individuating information should be combined appropriately. (Buss 1999, 377)

Examples of the way individuating information can distort, overwhelm, and even falsify statistical probability are extremely familiar in the history of rhetoric at every level.

A final conceptual primitive is the body/soul distinction. Although we ourselves are not divided between soul and matter, we think about the world in a broadly Cartesian way. We are "natural-born dualists," according to the psychologist Paul Bloom, distinguishing between entities that have the properties of bodies and entities that have the properties of souls—between persons and things. Our innate dualism is a conceptual primitive, like our sense of person. It profoundly affects our attitudes toward what we take to be members of each cate-

gory. But the boundary between persons and things, though it appears very early on in child development, is somewhat malleable. Bloom cites two cases in which the boundary appears to move. The first is disgust, and the second is slapstick humor. Both examples, as it happens, show that our beliefs about the world depend on where we draw the person/thing distinction. On disgust, Bloom asks: "Would you wear someone else's clothes? What if the person has experienced an amputation, or suffered from a disease like tuberculosis? What about a moral taint—would you wear Hitler's sweater? Timothy McVeigh's baseball cap? Many people say no. In fact, even if the item is fully cleaned and comes from a normal, healthy, morally acceptable person, many of us still prefer not to wear a stranger's clothes. We are easily disgusted by other people" (Bloom 2004, 175). I take Bloom's point to be that if you do not know you are wearing the newly cleaned sweater of somebody who died of tuberculosis, you will not feel squeamish about wearing it. Your disgust reaction sets in only when you animate the sweater by imagining the person living inside of it.

A troubling feature of human psychology is that we can just as easily deanimate other people, excluding them from the circle of personhood. The moral imperative set by Immanuel Kant is to treat other people as ends in themselves, rather than as means to some end. If you are a Kantian, you make sure a person is never a tool in your hands, nor you a tool in theirs (except when you choose to be). Unfortunately, imperatives address those sorts of things we are somewhat likely to do: nobody ever has to tell us not to flip upside down and walk on the ceiling, for example, nor are there laws against eating our own heads.[1] What the Kantian imperative tells us is that people can be and often are tools in our hands—indeed, that the concept of person is elastic, covering a range of animate beings but excluding others. Some groups of humans can even be excluded altogether. This has been a major issue in ethics—specifically, in the pragmatist critique of Kantianism. According to the pragmatists, it is impossible to ground ethics in an absolute respect for common humanity, as Kantians would have it, when one group might simply say, "But we do not view our enemies as people." Richard Rorty brilliantly writes in a piece on human rights: "Serbian murderers and rapists do not think of themselves as violating human rights. For they are not doing these things to fellow human beings, but to Muslims" (Rorty 1993, 1). Clearly that boundary between persons and things is exceedingly easy to manipulate, perhaps, as Paul Bloom suggests, by turning classes of people into objects: "Disgust is a response to people's bodies, not to their souls. If you see people as souls, they have moral worth: You can hate them and hold them responsible; you can view them as evil; you can love them and forgive them, and see them as

blessed. They fall within the moral circle. But if you see them solely as bodies, they lose any moral weight. Empathy does not extend to them. And so dictators and warmongers have come across the insight, over and over again, that you can get people to commit the most terrible atrocities using the tool of disgust" (Bloom 2004, 177).

Disgust and genocide are extreme cases. A less intense example is comedy. Bloom argues that slapstick humor often "involves a shift in perspective, and one of the most striking shifts is when we move from seeing someone as a sentient being, a soul, to seeing the person as merely a body. Henri Bergson proposed that humor is based on this body/soul duality—what he called 'something mechanical encrusted upon the living' and what Koestler called 'the dualism of subtle mind and inert matter.'" (ibid., 185). Our innate body/soul dualism is both hardwired and malleable; if it were only one or the other, neither disgust nor comedy could take root.

People are uniquely fascinated by events that disturb their innate dualism. For several years now, a museum exhibit called Body Worlds has been traveling the globe, drawing enormous crowds. The show features the work of a German doctor, Gunther von Hagens. Von Hagens has invented a technique called plastination, which preserves corpses in an incredibly lifelike state. The corpses in this exhibit have been put in various positions. A basketball player dribbles down the court, his skin stripped off to reveal his nerves and muscles. It sounds macabre, but people have been flocking to see it. The *New York Times,* which used "people are flocking," showed a picture of a two-year-old girl staring at a plastinated foot in wonder (July 3, 2004). Body/soul problems are everywhere, in every aspect of human communication and culture. They even haunt such dead metaphors as "people have been flocking to see it," in which humans are briefly and dizzyingly stripped of their humanity and likened to a "mindless" flock of animals.

To put it mildly, these conceptual primitives—animism, personification, and the body/soul distinction—have been a fertile source of literary interest. Writers can always deliver a shock of mild surprise by personifying things like pots, kettles, and banknotes. They can exploit the widespread human tendency towards animism while keeping us on the edge of our seats about whether animism, unfazed by experience, will tip over into neurosis. Writers have always loved people who overattribute agency to features of the natural environment by imagining castles in the air, low breathings coming after them from the surrounding cliffs, blessings in the gentle breeze, whales, ouzels, and so on. The critical literature on these phenomena is deep and wide (Warner 2006).

By themselves, these conceptual primitives do not explain the massive amount

of social information in our environment. They may shape the contours, but they do not pick out the deep heart of the matter, which is elsewhere—not in our use of other people (and their surrounding aura) as tools of practical reason but in the *way* we use them. To get at what I mean, I offer an example from English poetry. It is meant to show that even apparently ordinary animism conceals deeper social motivations. The example may seem fanciful, but one of the main tenets of this book is that literary authors have often described cognitive heuristics and biases correctly, long before philosophy and science were able to do so. Literary authors get these biases right, not because they *essentially* have some greater insight into human psychology, but because of their incentives: they need to know what interests people, what appeals to them. Writers become popular not because of a mysterious ether that surrounds them but because they know how to give people what they want. William Wordsworth (1770–1850) is one of the greatest explorers of cognitive heuristics in the English language. The beginning of his great autobiographical epic, *The Prelude* [1850], looks at first glance like a paean to animism:

> oh there is blessing in this gentle breeze,
> A visitant that while it fans my cheek
> Doth seem half-conscious of the joy it brings
> From the green fields, and from yon azure sky.
> Whate'er its mission, the soft breeze can come
> To none more grateful than to me; escaped
> From the vast city, where I long had pined
> A discontented sojourner: now free,
> Free as a bird to settle where I will.
> What dwelling shall receive me? in what vale
> Shall be my harbour? underneath what grove
> Shall I take up my home? and what clear stream
> Shall with its murmur lull me into rest?
> The earth is all before me. With a heart
> Joyous, nor scared at its own liberty,
> I look about; and should the chosen guide
> Be nothing better than a wandering cloud,
> I cannot miss my way. (Bk. 1, lines 1–17)

In fact, Wordsworth does miss his way, rather spectacularly, and not just once, but over and over again. Every episode and "spot of time" turns into an occasion to record how he went astray and got his comeuppance. This is a familiar human,

and especially poetic, story—the Everyman, the pilgrim, the knight becomes mired in error and stumbles over the obstacles in his path. In Wordsworth's version, the pilgrim's world is charged with the grandeur of consciousness, the animating breeze and the natural world singing him to his new home (like the clear stream that "murmurs" him to rest).

Yet all these mild spirits cover up the presence of a countervailing spirit decidedly *un*mild. That spirit belongs to Milton's Satan, who slips into Wordsworth's *Prelude* as that breeze. The allusion to Satan would have been evident to Wordsworth's readers, since Wordsworth was avidly reworking a famous passage from *Paradise Lost* (1667). In the poem's pivotal scene, Satan, inhabiting the serpent's body, comes across Eve working alone in the garden and begins to tempt her. But before he starts, he finds himself momentarily stunned by how beautiful she is—so stunned, in fact, that he briefly considers giving up his hellish project altogether.

> Much he the place admired, the person more.
> As one who long in a populous city pent,
> Where houses thick and sewers annoy the air,
> Forth issuing on a summer's morn to breathe
> Among the pleasant villages and farms
> Adjoined, from each thing met conceives delight,
> The smell of grain, or tedded grass, or kine,
> Or dairy, each rural sight, each rural sound;
> If chance with nymph-like step fair virgin pass,
> What pleasing seemed, for her now pleases more,
> She most, and in her look sums all delight.
> Such pleasure took the Serpent to behold
> This flow'ry plat, the sweet recess of Eve
> Thus early, thus alone; her heav'nly form
> Angelic, but more soft, and feminine,
> Her graceful innocence, her every air
> Of gesture or least action overawed
> His malice, and with rapine sweet bereaved
> His fierceness of the fierce intent it brought:
> That space the Evil One abstracted stood
> From his own evil, and for the time remained
> Stupidly good, of enmity disarmed,
> Of guile, of hate, of envy, or revenge;

> But the hot hell that always in him burns,
> Though in mid-heav'n, soon ended his delight,
> And tortures him now more, the more he sees
> Of pleasure not for him ordained. (Bk. 9, lines 445–472)

Milton's famous simile describes a person who issues forth from the close, dirty city into a fresh, sunny rural paradise of small villages and open fields. Satan is the newly sprung city dweller, and Eve is the "flowery plat, the sweet recess." The sight of her so stuns him that he find himself unable to think. For Satan, thinking is everything: he thinks therefore he is. Now he accidentally becomes "stupidly good." There is a strong anticleverness strain in English literature, of which Satan's momentary abstraction ("stupidly good") is just the most comical and wonderful apotheosis. Many literary characters become stupid because they are too clever, going all the way back to the clever student Nicholas in Chaucer's *Miller's Tale,* who gets himself taken down—literally—because of his intellectual pretensions. In this familiar tale, the more Machiavellian you are, the more likely you are to be brought low.

Milton's version of this fabliau perfectly foreshadows the use that Wordsworth will make of it. In Milton's version, the *vehicle* of the simile—the terms in which it is written, the "just as" part—describes a person's encounter with nature, whereas the *tenor* of the simile—what it means, the "so" part—describes Satan's encounter with Eve. What seems to be a simple pastoral scene is really an intense meeting of two cunning minds, just as Wordsworth's simple animistic fantasy turns out to be a revision of Milton's simile. Milton shows how a solitary animistic fantasy brings a social world with it in its train. Wordsworth's achievement in the opening lines of *The Prelude* is apparently to scrub clean most of the evidence of the social world, rewriting Satan's blinding encounter with Eve as a single mind's animistic encounter with nature. But the social world is there nonetheless, perhaps even more strongly because Wordsworth has gone to such lengths to shovel it into an allusion. The poet's apparently solitary mind contains multitudes of other characters; he harbors both Satan, released from the vast city, and Eve, confident, but about to take a wrong step.

What does the coded appearance of these mind-soaked characters reveal about the animistic mind? Their appearance reveals that the social world is never far from how we think about the natural one and that the way we think about the social world grounds the way we conceive of nature's intentions. So far is Wordsworth from having freed himself from the deep coils of human psychology into a state of mild animism that he brings a host of characters with him in his train.

I have taken us into the byways of Wordsworth's Milton not merely to visit an old-fashioned literary topic. Rather, I mean to introduce the reason that we are driven to try to make sense of other people at all: Machiavellian intelligence. Wordsworth's pose of mild communion with the air masks a deeply social and Machiavellian spirit. Wordsworth's nature poetry channels Milton's Satan just as a simple posture of animism conceals a deeper pattern of social reasoning.

Why Machiavellian? In the 1970s, researchers began to formulate a loose confederacy of ideas about the origin, meaning, and aims of human intelligence. Humans are primates who have evolved to live in highly complex, socially stratified groups. Under certain conditions, human groups become extremely hierarchical. High status within a group is usually a good predictor of fitness. We humans have evolved mental mechanisms to cope with group living and to help us negotiate the byways of status. These mental mechanisms are especially attuned to calculation, cooperation, and conflict. Indeed, researchers now think that human intelligence evolved to handle the social complexity of living in groups—to outwit fellow primates, to think several moves ahead of them on a giant social chessboard, and to keep track of alliances. This view is called the Machiavellian intelligence hypothesis. It posits that social complexity has put even greater adaptive pressure on cognition than many nonsocial activities have and that intelligence evolved in part to meet the rigorous demands of social interactions. In short, the relevant adaptive environment for high intelligence is other people. First formulated in the psychological literature by Nicholas Humphrey in his influential 1976 paper "The Social Function of the Intellect," Machiavellian intelligence is a hypothesis about the reasons that the human brain got so big. I quote a helpful definition from the MIT *Encyclopedia of Cognitive Sciences:*

> The Machiavellian Intelligence Hypothesis takes several forms, but all stem from the proposition that the advanced cognitive processes of primates are primarily adaptations to the special complexities of their social lives, rather than to nonsocial environmental problems such as finding food, which were traditionally thought to be the province of intelligence. . . . Why "Machiavellian" intelligence? Humphrey talked of "the social function of intellect" and some authors refer to the "social intelligence hypothesis." But "social" is not really adequate as a label for the hypothesis. Many species are social (some living in much larger groups than primates) without being particularly intelligent; what is held to be special about primate societies is their complexity, which includes the formation of sometimes fluid and shifting alliances and coalitions. Within this context, primate social relationships have been characterized as manipu-

> lative and sometimes deceptive at sophisticated levels. Primates often act as if they were following the advice that Niccolo Machiavelli offered to sixteenth-century Italian prince-politicians to enable them to socially manipulate their competitors and subjects. "Machiavellian intelligence" therefore seemed an appropriate label, and it has since passed into common usage.
>
> An important prediction of the hypothesis is that greater social intellect in some members of a community will exert selection pressures on others to show greater social expertise, so that over evolutionary time there will be an "arms race" of Machiavellian intelligence. Indeed, one of the questions the success of the hypothesis now begins to raise is why such escalation has not gone further than it has in many species. But the way in which the hypothesis highlights competitive interactions must not be interpreted too narrowly. "Machiavellianism" in human affairs is often taken to include only a subset of social dealings characterized by their proximally selfish and exploitative nature. Although animal behavior is expected to be ultimately selfish in the face of natural selection (by definition a competition), cooperation with some individuals against others can be one means to that end. Primate coalitions provide good examples. Indeed, because an important component of exploiting one's social environment includes learning socially from others, primate "culture" also comes within the scope of Machiavellian intelligence. (Wilson and Keil 1999, s.v. "Machiavellian Intelligence")

The term *Machiavellian,* which focuses on the role of cunning, may turn out to be just as misleading and contentious as Richard Dawkins's *selfish gene,* which got sociobiology off on the wrong foot by stressing the devilish side of our natures. Better terms may be the c*ooperative intelligence hypothesis* or the s*ocial intelligence hypothesis.* On the other hand, Machiavellianism makes for good stories. As Milton (and Wordsworth) knew, Satan is more one of the most fascinating characters in all of English literature, much more so than God, precisely because his psychology is so Machiavellian.

Machiavellianism is an incredibly powerful source of literary interest because it is an incredibly powerful source of human interest. Milton's Satan lurks in the background of many other literary characters, some of whom appear in these pages: Richardson's Lovelace, Nabokov's Humbert Humbert, George Eliot's Edward Casaubon, Henry James's Gilbert Osmond, Thomas Mann's Herr Settembrini, just to name a few. But Machiavellianism is a very broad literary concern. Like Satan himself, Machiavellianism hides almost everywhere in plain sight, usually as an early and discredited option that the main characters flirt with

and reject. This pattern holds from Shakespeare to Fielding and can be expressed as a rule of thumb: the more openly Machiavellian you are, the less chance you have of actually turning out to be the hero of the story; if you do turn out to be the hero, your Machiavellianism was just a phase. Here, for example, is an observation about the Machiavellian intelligence hypothesis from a cognitive scientist:

> Higher primate intelligence was an adaptation for handling the problems of social life. . . . A thumb-nail sketch of the social tactician depicted by this work reveals a primate who has a sophisticated knowledge of the individual characteristics and propensities of others in the group and the network of social relationships existing between them; a flexible capacity to form cooperative alliances with some, so outmaneuvering others in competition for resources; and a considerable repertoire of tactics for social manipulation, ranging from deception to reciprocal helping. Primates are thus portrayed as little "Machiavellians," several of their strategies being just those advocated by the pioneering power theorist's advice to sixteenth-century princes and politicians. [Nicholas] Humphrey went on to suggest that such a Machiavellian primate would be better able to win the crucial social games if it could get one step ahead of its adversary through mind reading, or as he put it, acting as a "natural psychologist." (Whiten 1991, 3)

Compare this sketch of the Machiavellian primate to two of the male characters in Jane Austen's *Emma.* Before Mr. Knightley and Emma meet the dashing young stranger Frank Churchill, Mr. Knightley expresses a bitterly negative worry about him. In this conversation both Emma and Mr. Knightley imagine what Frank Churchill will be like when they meet him. Emma declares that he has special social gifts:

> "My idea of him is that he can adapt his conversation to the taste of every body, and has the power as well as the wish of being universally agreeable. To you, he will talk of farming; to me, of drawing or music; and so on to every body, having that general information on all subjects which will enable him to follow the lead, or take the lead, just as propriety may require, and to speak extremely well on each; that is my idea of him." "And mine," said Mr. Knightley warmly, "is, that if he turn out any thing like it, he will be the most insufferable fellow breathing! What! at three-and-twenty to be the king of his company—the great man—the practiced politician, who is to read every body's character, and make every body's talents conduce to the display of his own superiority; to be dispensing his flatteries around, that he may make all appear like fools compared

> with himself! My dear Emma, your own good sense could not endure such a puppy when it came to the point." "I will say no more about him," cried Emma, "you turn every thing to evil." (Austen and Stafford 2003, 100)

Knightley is jealous of Frank Churchill and is worried that his place will be usurped by a younger male. He engages in an aggressive display, which rather catches Emma by surprise. Ironically, all Mr. Knightley really accuses Frank Churchill of is practicing the famous eighteenth-century virtue of complaisance—the art of making oneself pleasing in company. What could be more pleasing, after all, than to find one's self in the company of a handsome young man who is so eager to please? Mr. Knightley turns out to be right about Frank Churchill: he is venal and dissembling. But only somebody thoroughly insightful—or Machiavellian—could see through the whole plot (of Frank Churchill, of the novel) at such an early stage, when everyone else is blindly thinking up different pairings and possibilities. The complaisant Frank Churchill is a false hero, but Knightley's reaction to him is extreme—too soaked in cunning. An overwrought Machiavellianism is something Knightley has to slough off in favor of a more subtle, less aggressive, more inclusive insightfulness. Emma, though initially put off, comes around, eventually offering Knightley the highest compliment an intelligent Machiavellian hero could receive: he has "penetration."

The Machiavellian intelligence hypothesis can help to explain why we are driven to make sense of other people. Humans are intensely social. The environments that both succor and threaten them usually include other humans. To the great distress (and ongoing surprise) of moralists everywhere, humans prefer social to other kinds of information, a fact that explains why, for instance, there are so many more human interest stories in the press than, say, detailed analyses of budget deficits and trade imbalances. There is a lovely quotation, probably apocryphally attributed to the British philosopher Bertrand Russell, that "the mark of a civilized man is the capacity to read a column of numbers and weep"—but I'm afraid that, on this view, none of us is really civilized.

The Machiavellian intelligence hypothesis helps us understand *how* we think about other people. Intricacy and anticipation are crucial, as is the element of strategic thinking. We scan other people because we have to cooperate with them and compete against them. Social success is a matter of delicately negotiating a difficult game board. What are the mechanisms that help us do it?

Massive research over the past decades has highlighted the sorts of cognitive capacities we bring to the task. Social exchange consists of a welter of practices that create the living feel of social experience. These practices depend on a few

mental mechanisms, particularly mechanisms that allow us to engage in mind reading. Mind reading is the name of a capacity that most humans (and perhaps some other primates) possess as well as the name of the emerging field within cognitive psychology devoted to studying it—a field currently burgeoning with new books, research papers, and think pieces. Most of the research has come from the fields of child development and autism research since mind reading is relatively easy to measure: children develop mind-reading skills in predictable stages, and many autistics seem to lack mind-reading capacities. What is mind reading? Here is the most basic definition: "People attribute to self and others a host of mental states, ranging from beliefs and aspirations to headaches, disappointments, and fits of anger. Other creatures undoubtedly have pains, expectations, and emotions. But *having* a mental state and *representing* another individual as having such a state are entirely different matters. The latter activity, *mentalizing* or *mind reading,* is a second-order activity: It is a mind thinking about minds" (emphasis in original) (Goldman 2006, 3).

Boiled down, mind reading simply means representing to ourselves the mental states of other people—attributing to them beliefs, intentions, desires, and attitudes. Humans and other primates do it with varying degrees of competence. Knowing what other people are thinking and being able to predict what they are going to do are two of the most important cognitive skills we humans possess. In fact, we stake our lives every day on such predictions (for instance, when we drive a car). That we do so casually shows that such a skill is largely unconscious.

Mind reading is an evolved capacity. No prehistoric child could survive without it, since once separated from the breast, survival depends on recognizing those who intend to threaten or love us. Even for creatures living in highly organized social structures, mind reading is a tool that is used to avoid social, if not physical, death. We use mind reading for roughly the same reasons that it evolved: to inspect rivals, to calibrate status, to nurture our interests. So deeply is it a part of how we come to understand ourselves—as social, moral, and sexual creatures who develop in relation to other people at all stages of our lives—that psychology researchers have only recently begun to see it as a topic to be investigated in its own right.

We learn to mind read by tracking the motions of others and correlating those motions to purposes (Baron-Cohen 1995b, 34–35). At the higher end of social complexity we navigate charged political fields, detect cheaters and hypocrites, fashion ourselves to the times, and test how far we can go. By mind reading, we attribute second- and third-order intentions to people. The skill is related to Machiavellian intelligence in the following way: if Machiavellian intelligence is

the answer to why we are driven to make sense of other people, mind reading is the tool we use to put those abilities into play.

Mind reading sounds rather simple, but the question of how we do it is complicated. Two schools of thought have emerged. The first holds that we have a "theory of mind"—namely, a rough-and-ready evolved folk psychology that we use to represent to ourselves the beliefs, intentions, and desires of other people. When we attribute mental states to others, we represent to ourselves their states of mind by referring to our built-in sense of human psychology. The second school of thought holds something different. Rather than referring to a built-in theory or folk psychology, it argues that we simulate other people's states of mind using imitation and empathy. Simulation theorists argue that we cognitively put ourselves in another person's shoes and allow ourselves vicariously to go through whatever they are going through. Both of these accounts, *theory theory* and *simulation theory,* have much to recommend them, and I see no reason to choose between them. Both views contain elements that strongly illuminate key features of literary art, and I highlight those features as the book unfolds.

Let me start with theory theory. What does this evolved cognitive architecture do? Various descriptions have been brought forward about our theory of mind. Rather than a "mental encyclopedia" or "catalogue of all things," theory of mind appears to be "a bundle of inference systems, differently activated by different objects" (Boyer 2001, 102). Each inference system, as Pascal Boyer explains, is "adapted to particular kinds of events and automatically suggests explanations for these events. Whenever we produce an explanation of any event . . . we make use of these special inference systems, although they run so smoothly in the mind that we are not aware of their operation. Indeed, spelling out how they contribute to our everyday explanations would be tedious . . . because our minds run all these chains of inferences automatically, and only their results are spelled out for conscious inspection" (17). There are scores of inference systems wired into the architecture of theory of mind, including inference systems for agent attribution, goal detection, motivation detection, causation, intuitive physics, folk biology, and more "complex domains as animacy and intentionality" (102).

Simon Baron-Cohen has argued that theory of mind is its own mental module, which builds on a range of other dedicated modules. These include an intention detector, an eye-direction detector, and a shared attention mechanism. The *intention detector* is the means of picking out agents and attributing purpose and motive to them. The *eye-direction detector* is a mechanism for tracking what other people are looking at and, indeed, for inferring that they are looking at something and that their gaze is intentional. Eyes and eye contact are critically

important to theory of mind. Another name for the whole system might be *perspective taking.* The *shared attention mechanism* is the ability to call someone else's attention to an external object, to know that they are attending to the object, and to know that they know that you are attending to the object. Perspective-taking is also called *recursion,* or *embedded mind reading* (Baron-Cohen 1995a, 1).

Theory of mind may be connected to self-regulation. We thirst after social explanations, in part because they help us to regulate ourselves. Social explanations that improve our well-being are pleasurable; social explanations that weaken our position cause us to be anxious. Thus people select emotionally pleasing social explanations and downplay dissonant ones, often selectively editing social information in emotionally pleasing ways. Other names for *selective editing* are *hot cognition* or *motivated reasoning,* topics that have justly been pursued by psychologists in recent years.

Most self-regulating processes are unconscious. In fact, consciousness itself may be an elaborate mechanism for connecting images to the self-regulating processes that go on unconsciously. Or so argues the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio in *The Feeling of What Happens.* "Consciousness," he writes, is

> the possibility of bringing the system of life regulation—which is housed in the depths of the brain in regions such as the brain stem and hypothalamus—to bear on the processing of the images which represent the things and events which exist inside and outside the organism. Why [is] this really an advantage? Because survival in a complex environment, that is, efficient management of life regulation, depends on taking the right action, and that, in turn, can be greatly improved by purposeful preview and manipulation of images in mind and optimal planning. Consciousness allowed the regulation of two disparate aspects of the process—inner life regulation and image making. (Damasio 1999, 25)

In Damasio's account, a picture of consciousness starts to emerge as an image-making device that surrounds (and supports) an internal "system of life-regulation": "Consciousness generates the knowledge that images exist within the individual who forms them, it places images in the organism's perspective by referring those images to an integrated representation of the organism, and in so doing, allows the manipulation of the images to the organism's advantage. Consciousness, when it appears in evolution, announces the dawn of individual forethought" (25–26). Theory of mind is to the process of overall self-regulation what consciousness is to internal self-regulation: it provides images that help the organism navigate the outside world.

I call it being "in the humus," the black compost between the earth and oxidiz-

ing leaves. Social information is like humus, a thick blanket that grows out of the earth and envelopes the flotsam above it. Our bodies are like the earth. Other people are like the leaves. Social information binds us, in our embodied consciousness, to them. The topmost layer of leaves blows around like the impressions that flicker past us. Each impression, however sudden or fleeting, hooks itself into some part of our embodied consciousness. Social information is the medium. We use it to decode the bits of flotsam. The flotsam is a stream of digital bits, sounds, signals, noise, images, voices, flickers, glimpses—anything that triggers our whole clanking enormous cognitive armature to start on its characteristic business, which is to make sense of other people.

Making sense of other people is a leveraged game. We play the game in three-dimensional space and time. We make sense of people through a massive coordination effort, tracing how other people make sense of them. The game pieces consist of other people's minds or fragments of their minds. Their minds are always moving, and our perception of them determines how they move. This leverage triggers a massive round of reflexivity. The path we take to make sense of other people is always a detour up and down the layers of reflexivity.

What I have been calling layers of reflexivity has another name: orders of intentionality. *Intentionality* is a "recursive sequence of mind states involving beliefs: 'I believe that you believe that I believe that something is the case' is an example of third-order intentionality" (Dunbar 2000, 239). In order to navigate such a sentence (and the play of minds underneath it), a person needs theory of mind. The formal definition of theory of mind is the ability to recognize second-order intentionality (i.e., "I believe that you believe that something is the case") (239). Daniel Dennett has proposed (and experimental evidence has confirmed) that humans can keep track of about six orders of intentionality, but after about three it becomes difficult to do so without intense concentration. An oft-quoted sentence of Dennett's makes the point nicely: "I suspect that you wonder whether I realize how hard it is for you to be sure that you understand whether I mean to be saying that you can recognize that I believe you want me to explain that most of us can keep track of only about five or six orders" of intentionality (89).

Children develop that capacity around the age of four. An important stage in theory of mind is the ability to recognize that someone else holds a false belief. Children possess theory of mind once they are able to pass a "false belief test." In the classic "false belief" test, a child watches two other children, Sally and Anne, playing with a marble. Sally places the marble in a basket in front of her and then leaves the room. While she is gone, Anne transfers the marble into a box on her table. Sally comes back into the room. The child is asked, where will Sally look for

the marble? By the age of three or four, unless she is autistic, a child can pass this test. An autistic child will rely on what she knows to be true rather than what Sally believes, incorrectly, to be true: she will point to Anne's box, knowing where the marble is and not inferring that Sally's beliefs might differ from her own (Baron-Cohen 1995b, 70).

Some researchers, such as Andrew Byrne and Richard Whiten, have connected theory of mind to pretense, deception, lying, and tactical maneuvering. This makes sense because being able to deceive someone argues for at least second-order intentionality: "In order to engage in tactical deception, an animal has to be capable of appreciating that its opponent believes something to be the case. By altering the information available to the opponent, the deceiver attempts to influence the beliefs of the opponent: I have to understand that, by behaving in a certain way, you will believe that I am doing something innocuous. And that obviously involves holding a false belief" (Dunbar 1996, 93).

Can a chain of mind reading be extended indefinitely? Evidence suggests not. Robin Dunbar and his colleagues have conducted a series of experiments on mind reading in normal adults. The experiments were designed to find out just how much mind reading people are capable of. Subjects were given two sets of stories that described common everyday happenings. The stories contained between three and five levels of embedded intentionality (in the limit, "Jane believes that Peter supposes that Sarah thinks that Simon believes that Sarah would like to go out with Peter"). Subjects then answered questions about the stories. The second set of stories, accounts of events with no mind reading involved at all, were designed to see if people could follow simple causal sequences ("A gave rise to B, which resulted in C, which in turn caused D., etc.") The results are striking: "Subjects had little problem with the factual causal reasoning story: error rates were approximately 5% across six levels of causal sequencing. Error rates on the mind-reading tasks were similar (5–10%) up to and including fourth-level intentionality, but rose dramatically to nearly 60% on fifth-order tasks. Apparently subjects found anything above fourth-order ('Simon believes that Peter supposes that Simon thinks that Peter wants . . .') extremely difficult to do" (ibid., 241). So people with ordinary mind-reading abilities operate comfortably between two and four levels of intentionality but find it a strain to go beyond that.

Theory of mind also helps to explain our capacity to enter into scenarios that we know to be fictional. Our ability develops, again, in predictable stages in childhood, roughly between ages three and four. In order to run any of our inference systems in a decoupled mode, we need to have some meta-representational capacities—that is, we need to have theory of mind. This is the approach favored

by Alan Leslie, the pre-eminent theorist of decoupling and meta-representations. Leslie has made this point in an important paper on how we develop pretend play. "To the organism who entertains them, primary representations are by definition transparent—that is, they directly represent objects, states of affairs, and situations in the world. Pretend representations, by contrast, are opaque, even to the organism who entertains them. They are in effect not representations of the world but representations of representations. For this reason I shall call them second order or . . . meta-representations" (Leslie 1987, 416–17). We make second-order representations by copying them and then modifying their features; for instance, we can pretend that a banana is a telephone only because we fuse the two primary representations in our mind. Successful fusion is possible only because we "quarantine" the resulting meta-representations from reality; children, as Leslie pointed out, are not confused about whether the pretend cup of tea really is hot (Baron-Cohen 2007).

But all of this raises a question. Why do we engage in meta-representations in the first place? Primary representations, after all, require no special explanation. The brain, using the visual cortex and other mechanisms, supplies a picture of the outside world that needs to be accurate. But secondary representations are constrained by no such requirement. The very fact that we can make them seems a bit puzzling. After all, children as young as nine to fourteen months can pretend (ibid. 2007). What would push them in this direction? Perhaps the answer is Machiavellian intelligence. The very capacity to pretend, Leslie claims, "is not seen as a development in the understanding of objects and events as such, but rather as the beginnings of a capacity to understand cognition itself. It is an early symptom of the human mind's ability to characterize and manipulate its own attitudes to information. Pretending oneself is thus a special case of the ability to understand pretense in others (someone else's attitude to information). In short, pretense is an early manifestation of what has been called theory of mind" (Leslie 1987, 416).

So what about the alternative view, simulation theory? For fiction and literature, simulation theory is by far the most promising of the mind-reading hypotheses—(whatever its virtues for understanding mind reading generally). This is especially true if one of the central simulationist mechanisms—mirror neurons—bears fruit. Simulation theory holds that people read other minds not by having a theory about what those minds are like but by running in their own minds the mental states experienced by the person who is the target of their mind reading. People then take the whole reasoning system "offline," so they avoid actually taking the actions that the target of the mind reading takes. Mental simu-

lation is, by its very nature, virtual, involving an act of what the philosopher Alvin Goldman calls "e-imagination," or enactment imagination. Enactment imagination describes the feeling of actually conjuring up a certain state of mind—perhaps in mild or diluted form (Goldman uses the metaphor of a "tincture," as in, we "conjure up a state that feels rather like a trace or a tincture" of the emotion that we are imagining). This key element of simulation theory was given a strong if circumstantial boost by the discovery of a class of neuron, called mirror neurons, in macaque monkeys. Mirror neurons work like this: when one monkey perform an action certain motor neurons fire. When a second monkey observes the first monkey performing that action, the same neurons fire in him as fire in the monkey performing the action. Several experiments have strongly suggested that mirror neurons operate in humans, too; in one experiment, the same muscles moved in the person observing an action as in the person doing the action (Gallese 2001, 35).

The cognitive study of theater and performance, where audiences see actors on stage in front of them, has already begun to draw on this exciting research.[2] And now literary studies are beginning, tentatively, to embrace it as well. Suzanne Keen posits that cognitive-scientific understandings of empathy and particularly of the workings of mirror neurons will eventually yield testable hypotheses about narrative empathy (Keen 2006, 207).

One philosopher, Greg Currie, believes that the simulation hypothesis explains imagination in general. Here is his account (I paraphrase). The imagination is crucial to processing information about the world. Suppose you want to assess how risky it would be to do some action. You could undertake to do it, but that would mean incurring all the costs (and risks). Instead, you could run an internal simulator, which would be a practical substitute. The simulator could be fairly realistic or it could run lots of strange scenarios. In either case, the simulator would allow you to experience (sometimes in a visceral, bodily way) what the course of action would be like (Currie 1995, 157).

The analogy with what critics have long claimed about the novel is clear (see my discussion of Catherine Gallagher earlier). But Currie's argument suggests an even tighter connection with fiction. Currie writes that "understanding by empathy and strategy testing are . . . distinct applications of the same simulative mechanism. Simulation can be of the mental states of another, of our own contemplated behavior, or of causal and other processes of more alien kinds, depending on how much information is required to run the simulation realistically. The empathetic function, emphasized by simulation theorists as an alternative to theorizing about other minds, is a zero case of simulation in which no, or minimal,

information is needed to run the simulation. It proceeds under its own causal steam" (ibid., 158–59). His point is that the same process performs two diverse and important tasks—mind reading through empathy and strategy testing. I have some doubts about Currie's overall claim that simulation is the process by which imagination works in general—and indeed, the rival theory-theory people have a pretty good candidate of their own (Baron-Cohen 2007).[3] But I have no doubt that the simulation theory captures crucial aspects of literary experience, and the key is the tightness, in literary narratives, of the relationship between empathy and strategy testing. For if the historical function of the novel is social and global strategy testing, its vehicle is other minds.

Consider that much research already exists on how readers track and remember patterns in narrative. This research all points in one direction, namely, that people—or stand-ins for people—are the primary vehicles by which we make sense of stories (Coplan 2004, 142). Readers typically adapt their point of view to one or another of a story's characters, usually the protagonist, and make their way through the narrative by tracking that character's actions. (The character can be anything from a particle to a concept—readers are especially susceptible to a point of view that thrusts itself into the reader's consciousness in a determined way—an idea I will return to in a moment). Any time a story impedes such progress—by, for example, introducing extraneous or irrelevant information—the reader becomes less attentive than when the story helps the reader to walk in the protagonist's shoes (Rall and Harris 2000, 202). Perspective taking of this kind begins very early; according to one study, "preschool children spontaneously adopt a point of view within fictional space" (207), and they are more likely to remember sentences that match than sentences that do not (Coplan 2004, 142). The upshot of much of this research is that readers attach themselves to mind-bearing entities and take their perspective. So important is the reader's attachment to the protagonist's point of view that the reader even has a hard time focusing on objects in a text if those objects are not closely connected to what the protagonist is doing (Rinck and Bower 1995, 119). Thus literary narratives weave the two sides of the simulation faculty rather tightly together. In this light, narrative can be seen as a vehicle by which people test various scenarios without risking too much. Hooking us onto some mind or other is the way to grab our attention.

Please keep this tight connection in mind for a moment while I briefly argue against it. By itself, simulation theory is not robust enough to capture how literary characters trigger a response in us. Simulation theory needs to be tweaked before it can cogently explain how narratives guide us in. Noel Carroll, a philoso-

pher of aesthetics, holds this view. According to him, "we do not typically emote with respect to fictions by simulating a character's mental state; rather . . . we respond emotionally to fiction from the outside. Our point of view is that of an observer of a situation and not...that of the participant in the situation. When a character is about to be ambushed, we feel fear for her; we do not imagine ourselves to be her and then experience 'her' fear" (Carroll 2001, 311–12). And he's right. Narrative storytelling often depends on the reader's awareness that there is a difference between what the character experiences and what the reader herself knows: "When the heroine is splashing about with abandon as, unbeknownst to her, a killer shark is zooming in for the kill, we feel concern for her. But that's not what she is feeling. She's feeling delighted" (Carroll 1990, 90). Empathy (the capacity to feel someone else's feelings) simply wouldn't kick in here, but something closer to sympathy might (i.e., a concern for others that doesn't necessarily involve feeling their pain) (Coplan 2004). Simulation may play a part now and then, but only in conjunction with other forms of mind reading.

The example of the shark and the swimmer—Chrissy, in the opening scene of *Jaws*—is a perfect case of mind reading stimulated by the viewer's awareness that the swimmer doesn't realize that she's about to become a victim. The example highlights our capacity to navigate different levels of intentionality rather quickly. Because literary mind reading comes in so many varieties, I favor the pluralist approach outlined by Amy Coplan:

> The reader is neither fixed nor immobile; he is neither forced to mirror exactly the characters' experiences nor forced to observe the characters' experiences from the outside. Through the process of empathic connection, the reader simulates a character's experience, but because he simultaneously has his own thoughts, emotions, and desires, his overall experience involves more than just that simulation.
>
> The reader empathizes but also reacts to what is learned through empathizing and to information he has access to that characters may not. Often the reader experiences sympathy as well as his own thoughts and feelings about the overall themes and messages of a narrative. These experiences are not shared by the characters and are not part of the reader's empathic engagement, but can occur while he empathizes with the characters. (Coplan 2004, 149)

The pluralist approach is both true and unobjectionable. Literary narratives trigger mind reading in a wide variety of ways. But there is one decisive constraint. A crucial—perhaps *the* crucial—element is that the consumer of a literary arti-

fact has to be guided by some controlling sensibility such as an author or a narrator. The existence, identity, beneficence, and/or tricksterism of such a person has been absolutely central to the study of narrative and indeed to literary theory since at least the 1960s. But the existence of the author or narrator also presents the simulationist with a special problem—namely, indirection. In a nutshell, the question becomes what exactly starts the reader off on a simulating train? Is it the stuff inside the story or it is some aspect of the narrative itself? The content or the form? These are also ancient and enduring literary theoretical questions.

So how can we reconcile these two approaches? On the one hand, I've said that the reader takes a perspective unusually tightly bundled with that of the protagonist. On the other, I've supported the idea that interesting narrative situations nudge the reader into seeing that what she knows about the scene is different from what the character knows. How can both of these things be true? Gregory Currie offers a lovely solution. He posits that when we read fiction, we adopt the point of view of a hypothetical "reader of fact" or "observer of fact." Alvin Goldman elaborates on why this reader of fact is important: "A fictional work, such as a novel or a film, is presented at the entry level as an account of a series of events as if they were happening or did happen. . . . It is hard to follow a narrative at all, to imbibe what it is intended to convey, without using this perspective as a baseline for all further responses to the work" (Goldman 2006, 287). The "reader of fact" learns all about the events in the story and empathizes at certain points with the characters in the story. He empathizes with the characters and insofar as we empathize with him, we do too (Currie 1997, 69–71). We take his perspective rather than that of the character at hand. Our hypothetical observer of fact both helps us keep track of the plot and lends us his state of mind. We no longer have to choose between simulating a character's state of mind and simulating the perspective of somebody who knows more (or sometimes less) than the character possibly could. We simply go along for the ride.

Going along for the ride is not, of course, a passive affair, nor is it an especially comfortable one. We are often asked to oscillate rapidly, sometimes excruciatingly, between simulating different mental states. We are asked to infer whether the narrator whose mind we are simulating is a reliable gauge to the world: Is the narrator nasty, vicious, unfeeling? courageous, truth telling, forthright? What if we find ourselves turned off by what the narrator asks us to do? Let me give a comically terrifying example, from Virginia's Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway.* Lady Bruton, the trouty old Amazon who is prevented from having a career in politics be-

cause of her gender and who befriends Richard Dalloway so that he can write letters to the *Times* on her behalf, climbs the stairs after one of her letter-writing lunches and begins to doze on the couch. Here is how she drifts into her nap:

> And Lady Bruton went ponderously, majestically, up to her room, lay, one arm extended, on the sofa. She sighed, she snored, not that she was asleep, only drowsy and heavy, drowsy and heavy, like a field of clover in the sunshine this hot June day, with the bees going round and about and the yellow butterflies. Always she went back to those fields down in Devonshire, where she had jumped the brooks on Patty, her pony, with Mortimer and Tom, her brothers. And there were the dogs; there were the rats; there were her father and mother on the lawn under the trees, with the tea-things out, and the beds of dahlias, the hollyhocks, the pampas grass; and they, little wretches, always up to some mischief! stealing back through the shrubbery, so as not to be seen, all bedraggled from some roguery. What old nurse used to say about her frocks!
>
> Ah dear, she remembered—it was Wednesday in Brook Street. Those kind good fellows, Richard Dalloway, Hugh Whitbread, had gone this hot day through the streets whose growl came up to her lying on the sofa. Power was hers, position, and income. She had lived in the forefront of her time. She had had good friends; known the ablest men of her day. Murmuring London flowed up to her, and her hand, lying on the sofa back, curled upon some imaginary baton such as her grandfathers might have held, holding which she seemed, drowsy and heavy, to be commanding battalions marching to Canada, and those good fellows walking across London, that territory of theirs, that little bit of carpet, Mayfair. (Woolf 1990, 111–12)

What are we to make of this tonally complex passage? Woolf's narrator is clearly making fun of Lady Bruton—a lady who commands armies in her mind while lying on her back on a Mayfair sofa, a woman deeply contemptuous of her own sex and also utterly complacent about her place among the world's upper ranks, a bellowing butch Xantippe riding wimpy Richard Dalloway around the room, a stock comic character whose literary ancestors are the legions of thwarted Amazonian lady politicians so beloved of male novelists. Most of the passage is narrated in *free indirect discourse,* a technique whose main virtue seems to be to slice the character's head off more effectively. The narrator allows us to feel distant and contemptuous of Lady Bruton in turn, to pick her up in our emotional pincer and to inspect her failings with a chilly eye. She's a brute after all. Perhaps we're indignant at how clueless the very rich can be (certainly if we shared her delusions we wouldn't admit to them, even secretly). But what of Lady Bruton's warm

and tender side? Lady Bruton has fond memories of her brothers, her girlhood, of Patty her pony—are we supposed to cast a cold eye on these too? Is the narrator humanizing Lady Bruton for us or perhaps slyly feeding the idea that Lady Bruton is the sort of stuff-and-nonsense aristocrat who likes animals better than people? And what if we simply aren't in the mood to follow the narrator along on her satirical hunt? What if we find her tone too arch, too brittle, too unforgiving of someone elderly and rather sadly imprisoned in the consommé of her own attitudes? All of this takes rather a lot of mentalizing to work out. We have to choose which of these two perspectives we'd rather keep company with, and part of Woolf's genius is that she doesn't let us settle into one or another too quickly.

The remarkable thing about this whole process of simulating and inference drawing is that we can turn it on and off at will—or, rather, an author can toggle the switch in us at will. Actually the latter seems more likely to be true than the former. Central to the simulationist account of enactment imagination is the idea that we eventually take our empathy "offline"; in other words, we detach it from any output in our own behavior. When we target someone else's mind, we run inferences about their plight using our own practical reason—but crucially we step off the track before we take relevant action (here empathy is to be distinguished from emotional contagion, which makes it almost impossible to stop empathizing) (Coplan 2004). Now the simulationists tend to be a bit vague about how this mechanism works, and they usually turn to fiction to explain it (Currie 1995). But perhaps they do this because narrative is the best place to see it all happening. Triggering this stopping-and-starting mechanism is crucial to narrative success. Not only would we not want to make the mistake of carrying through on our empathy, but in order to enjoy narratives at all we need to be freed from the worry that those narratives will colonize our reasoning systems altogether. We only allow literary narratives to hijack our practical reasoning schemes and take us along for the ride if they agree to let us off mercifully right before the crash. (Or that is the theory, anyway. Much angst about art has come from the fear, not only that we won't be able to step off before the crash, but also that art will actively encourage us to stay strapped in our seats.)

The fact is that literary narratives sometimes don't let us off, and perhaps they don't let their authors off, either. This is one way to explain a belief widely held by writers of fiction, namely, that their characters lead lives quite independent of them. Currie speculates:

> It is often said by writers that their characters lead "lives of their own" which can turn out in ways that are surprising to these writers. I take it we can put to

> one side elaborate and implausible metaphysical theories which would account for this by saying that characters are in some sense real beings with traits and goals independent of the writers who chronicle their lives. Instead we find a sensibly naturalistic explanation in terms of simulation. Assuming, plausibly, that thinking up fictional stories is an imaginative project just as reading them is, we can think of writers as engaged in simulations which are only very imperfectly under conscious control. It would then be unsurprising if these simulations sometimes run in ways unpredicted by, and in contradiction to the conscious wishes, of these writers. (Ibid., 163)

A fascinating study by three researchers at the University of Oregon confirms Currie's ideas in a dramatic way. These researchers interviewed fifty fiction writers whom they recruited by a variety of means. The writers ranged from those who had never published to "an award-winning author of several published novels who supported himself entirely by writing," and they came from a variety of backgrounds and nationalities (Taylor, Hodges, and Kohani 2002–3, 369). Fully 92 percent of these writers report having had some experience of the "illusion of independent agency," which the study's authors define as writers having the illusion that their characters have "their own thoughts, feelings, and actions. The essence of this conceptual illusion is the sense that the characters are independent agents not directly under the author's control" (366). The writers in the study reported such sensations as, "It's like I am taking dictation. Their voices are quite alive to me; all I have to do is listen," and "I have the sensation that the character . . . that the events are happening and I'm just reporting them" (372). Among the more successful professional writers in the group, the correlation was even higher, with these writers reporting an especially vivid and intense experience of the illusion of independent agency. The correlations were even higher when the study considered only the more successful professional writers (378). The researchers strongly suggest that the illusion of independent agency is connected to imaginary play in childhood (imaginary friends and so on) and also to mind-reading capacities in general. They speculate that "a similar or analogous type of illusion to the illusion of independent agency . . . is associated with careers involving the prediction of behavior in other people, as is the case in trial law, marketing, and politics. Like the fiction writers who start with a description of their fictional character, people whose jobs lead them to think about the opinions and activities of others may find that perspective taking becomes automatized" (378).

Novelists as diverse as Proust, Alice Walker, and J. K. Rowling (among a host of others) have reported that they, too, experience the illusion of independent

agency. Some are wry about it, others grossly sentimental. Many such reports can be found in the study I've just mentioned, and more can be found in a book called *Invisible Guests,* by Mary Watkins. Rather than quoting any of them, I will give the last word on this subject to Vladimir Nabokov. Here is part of an interview in the *Paris Review* in 1967:

> *Interviewer:* E. M. Forster speaks of his major characters sometimes taking over and dictating the course of his novels. Has this ever been a problem for you, or are you in complete command?
>
> *Nabokov:* My knowledge of Mr. Forster's works is limited to one novel which I dislike; and anyway it was not he who fathered that trite little whimsy about characters getting out of hand; it is as old as the quills, although of course one sympathizes with his people if they try to wriggle out of that trip to India or where ever he takes them. My characters are galley slaves. (Nabokov 1967, 5)

Let me press a bit more on the idea of "offline reasoning." The weakness in the simulation picture—the slightly mysterious mechanism by which targeted reasoning goes offline—is also the source of its appeal for the study of narrative. Narrative is even better than our own emotional architecture at toggling our empathy on and off. Think of narrative as an emotional prosthesis (I will return to this idea, which I owe to Joseph Carroll). But perhaps offline reasoning in a different sense is what allows us to care about literary characters at all. For the most striking thing about social reasoning is that it continues when people are out of range. From an evolutionary point of view, our ability to continue interacting with people after they die is something of a mystery, but that habit has surely given us our gift for engaging with people who never cross into our physical space. The right analogy for fictional reasoning is not somebody who dips in and out of our presence. As Jesse Bering puts it, you do not stop reasoning about your mother when she leaves the room, though you may imagine her in some other place. The right analogy is to somebody who we know is gone forever but with whom we still feel connected. "When it comes to death, human cognition apparently is not well equipped to update the list of players in our complex social rosters by accommodating the recent nonexistence of any one of them. This is especially the case, of course, for individuals who have played primary roles in our social lives, who did so for a long time, and who were never presumed to be continuously stationary when they were out of our sight. Because our minds are designed for offline as well as online social processing, we expect the periodic physical absence of social partners" (Bering 2006, 456).

Do literary narratives take advantage of our inability to admit that somebody we know is truly dead? After all, we no more need to believe in the existence of a literary character to interact with him or her than we need to believe in the existence of a ghost. We simply need to have the kind of mind that can be hailed by a passing piece of tantalizing mind stuff—and once hailed, can crank up its reasoning powers. Poring over the question of whether this tantalizing bit of mind stuff is a ghost, a god, or a fictional character is perhaps a way of rationalizing the experience in hindsight. But the amount of ink, and angst, that has been spent on just this question suggests that we get caught up in the drama of other minds in haste and then repent and worry about how strange it all is at leisure.

# *What Hails Us?*

Sometimes ticks lie in wait for years until they smell sweat and drop onto their prey. Is there some trigger in all the passing bits of mind stuff that makes us toggle our simulative capacity from off to on? What makes us want to put ourselves in someone else's shoes or take on their psychic burdens for a time? Much of the rest of this book will be devoted to trying to describe of those triggers—the ones that activate our higher-order mind reading capacities. I confess right away that my results probably look like a blindfolded person feeling the sides of an elephant and trying to describe it. In the past several years I have read many books, taught a range of texts, and pondered the question of what makes us care about literary characters. But I have no system to offer, no way of counting the triggers or describing their frequency relative to one another. Not that I am opposed to quantitative studies in the humanities, which strike me as enormously promising. My answers are surely quirkier and more impressionistic than they would be had I tested some measurable hypotheses. But let me plunge, all the same, in medias res.

A strange but fascinating feature of literary characters is how portable they are. Most powerfully associated with the novel, they nevertheless transcend any dependence on a specific genre. They are more flexible than other pieces of literary code, such as plot and allusion. They can jump between media—from print to stage to film—and between genres—from fiction to drama to poetry—quite easily. Characters have lives that extend infinitely in serial form. Some adult readers are addicted to escapist fantasy, and the characters they favor tend to be flat and extremely familiar (Appleyard 1990, 167). Minor characters in one work can take a star turn in the next, even becoming revivified by authors several centuries later. Literary characters seem to be endowed with an unusual staying power. Tracing the phenomenon back at least as far as Ovid's *Heroides,* Marjorie Garber suggests that portability has become something of a mania in contemporary fiction:

> In Alice Randall's soon-to-be-published novel "The Wind Done Gone," a mulatto half-sister of Scarlett O'Hara will tell her own tale. Described by Houghton

> Mifflin, the publisher, as "a book that gives a voice to those whom history has silenced," the novel is a prime example of literary ventriloquism, or what might be called ventriloquacity. In a technique familiar from television spin offs (remember how "All in the Family" begat "The Jeffersons" and "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" begat "Rhoda"?) a character with a minor or even absent role in the original novel now takes center stage and speaks. There have been a number of celebrated instances of ventriloquacity recently: "Lo's Diary," which told the story of Nabokov's Lolita from the nymphet's point of view; "Ahab's Wife," by Sena Jeter Naslund; Margaret Forster's "Lady's Maid," which revisits the courtship and marriage of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning through the eyes of Barrett's maid; John Updike's retelling of the Hamlet story, with faux-feminist trimmings, in "Gertrude and Claudius." Tom Stoppard's "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead" seemed, at the time it first appeared, a startlingly witty conceit: take two attendant lords and re-examine the most famous of all plays through their bewildered and befuddled eyes. But now the move has become almost second nature for novelists as well as playwrights and filmmakers. In "Mary Reilly," the novelist Valerie Martin retold the plot of Stevenson's "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" from the point of view of a housemaid. "I didn't want to correct Stevenson in any way," she said, "I wanted to narrate within the novel he created." (Garber 2001)

This practice first became commercialized when Samuel Richardson's 1737 novel *Pamela* led to a series of spin-offs (about which more later). We can surely multiply examples forever: many of the characters in Jane Austen's novels have gone on to lead full and rich afterlives (like Mr. and Mrs. Darcy, detectives who now have their own series). Several even have novels written from their point of view, for instance, Jane Fairfax, the much put-upon secret heroine of *Emma,* through whose eyes we get to see what we always suspected, that Emma is a more genteel version of that social climber Augusta Elton.

Then there is, of course, the sprawling world of "fan fiction," or fanfic, in which fans of the original work write new, often completely bizarre sequels (think of heterosexual women in the Midwest writing raunchy gay porn storylines for Harry Potter). Wikipedia suggests that the numerous spin-offs to Robinson Crusoe represent the world's first fanfic. Technology has massively sped up the addiction-delivery systems. TV studio marketing departments are masters at covering their tracks. A recent example: a TV studio created accounts on Twitter, a social networking site, for the lead characters in one of their shows. Now the characters can send out a heavy flow of news about their "doings." Their Twitter

feeds are enormously popular (Stelter 2008). The "doings" of fictional characters are simply addictive. To be sure, a few grumpy Jeremiahs have tried to stem the tide. Certain modernist writers—Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, V. S. Naipaul, and J. M. Coetzee all come to mind—have been famously coy and wary, weaning their readers sometimes painfully from all that is too psychologically fascinating. Still, they are little more than a counter-eddy in a hard running river of character-obsession that started swelling in the eighteenth century and grew massive in the nineteenth. Its high-water mark may be Henry James asking, "What is a picture or a novel that is *not* of character?" (Besant and James 1885, 69).

Since the eighteenth century, literary characters have had a tremendous power to circulate, to give people shared stories, and to sponsor discussion about personal and collective values. The 1995 BBC adaptation of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* induced a national "Mr. Darcy obsession" in Britain (partly focused on the actor Colin Firth, who played him). Helen Fielding then created Bridget Jones, a character in the grip of Darcy obsession, who herself became the subject of intense collective national fascination. The release of the movie *Bridget Jones's Diary* not only rekindled that fascination but also started a new fascination with the actress Renée Zellweger—her accent, her weight, and so on. Since the craze for Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* in the early eighteenth century, such fascinations (especially intensely focused on the marriage choices of young men and women) have periodically come to the foreground of Anglo-American literary culture.

One of the most notorious of these literary manias surrounded Samuel Richardson's 1748 novel *Clarissa.* Readers of the serialized novel were convinced that Clarissa, a young woman manipulated by her greedy family and then imprisoned and raped by the vile rake Lovelace, had the capacity to make choices. Yearning for a happy ending in which the two obviously superior lead characters could marry (as in Shakespearean or Restoration comedies), Richardson's ever-growing circle of female correspondents hoped to persuade him to get her to take action to stave off her rape. Even as he increased the tragic pressure on his characters, Richardson thoroughly enjoyed this response, tantalizing his readers with offers of coauthorship. He thus created a fascinating parallel between the novel's internal dynamic and the circumstances of its composition, since much of the novel's massive length gets filled out largely through mind reading, in which the characters engage in elaborate Machiavellian mental intrigues.

Is there a way to explain why literary characters are so portable? Or why people go to such great lengths to reimagine them and give them life in new media? The short answer is yes. The longer answer is the book you have in your

hands. But I have a midrange answer, too, which will also serve as one of the theses of this book. I have to back into it a little bit.

Here is a list of extremely famous literary characters: Ahab. Kurtz. Faust. Socrates. Achilles. Oedipus. Lady Macbeth. Jesus. Big Brother. Lolita. Falstaff. Hamlet. Rasputin. Iago. Jekyll and Hyde. Odysseus and the Trojan Horse. The Invisible Man. Sherlock Holmes and Professor Moriarty. Robinson Crusoe. Satan. Huck Finn. Tarzan. Don Juan. Arjuna. These characters have endured and their reputations have grown. Their names give us a small hit of that oceanic feeling. What's more, they have all come to be shorthand. Say any one of these names and waves of associations follow—associations nostalgic, defensive (did I once get that wrong on an English test?), fond, sweeping, elegant, incorrect, fickle. These characters are cultural heuristics, or rules of thumb: we use them to surf the cultural field and to make sense of its profusion; to take an obvious example, Big Brother seems perfectly to capture the feeling of nanny-state alienation.

Then there are others—more transitory, less famous, and tethered more firmly to their time and place: Leopold Bloom. Tess of the D'Urbervilles with her thousands and thousands. Anna Karenina. Aziz. Sebastian Flyte. Clarissa Dalloway. Billy Budd. Mr. Bulstrode. Hans Castorp. Clarissa Harlowe. Miss Bates. Madame Merle. Maisie. Humbert Humbert. Uncle Toby. Lovelace. Lily Bart. Isabel Archer. Emma. The Fat Foolish Scullion. Amasa Delano. Kate Clephane. Peter Walsh. Pribislav Hippe. Undine Spragg. Raffles. These are slightly mistier and more ambivalent figures, the sorts of characters with blurred edges and strong but not fanatical followings. A writer might have to work a little bit harder to raise them off the old page and onto the new (has anyone's heart ever beat wildly at the prospect of bodice-ripping fanfic starring Undine Spragg?) So why do some literary characters get to be shorthand while others do not? Why are some characters blessed or cursed by having much of the roundness squeezed out of them, while others never come to stand for anything at all except an ancient memory trace?

If we look at the first list, we can see that the most famous literary characters are the most Machiavellian. Not that they are the most manipulative, though some of them certainly are. In their original habitats, they provoke reflection. They are the most penetrating, quick-sighted, far seeing, and all knowing. They are richest in mind reading. And that explains, I think, why they endure and why they spread. Characters that require lots of mind reading appeal because their perceptive powers lie just slightly outside the limits of what ordinary humans are capable of. They have—or claim to have—greater insight into the things people care about: virtue and vice, crime, the tracks of disease, money, cheating, and

hypocrisy. When they use their powers for evil, they have a superhuman capacity to exploit other people. There is a strong correlation between high Machiavellian intelligence and broad literary appeal. Any characters atop a list of the favorite literary characters of all time would score extremely high in Machiavellian intelligence.

The world does not lack for such lists. I have scanned websites, books, and magazines and found hundreds of them. Hamlet is usually first, followed by Oedipus, followed by Don Quixote, followed by an array of characters from children's literature of the past seven or eight decades. What they have in common is that they are more insightful than their flesh-and-blood brethren—or accidentally insightful, in the case of Hamlet, Oedipus, and Don Quixote. They tend to be endowed with superhuman powers. Each lives the swirling dance of knowledge allowed and knowledge denied. They live, in Stanley Cavell's famous phrase, between acknowledgment and avoidance.

But so, as it happens, do all the other, less famous characters that I have listed above, the ambiguous ones. Each one represents some especially knotty problem in Machiavellian intelligence. Sometimes the problem is telegraphed in the language of the novel in which they appear, in key words or images, in a certain cast of metaphor. Sometimes these characters face moral and political problems about social information. Sometimes the question of what they or others know or do not know is the most important thing about them.

Take Big Brother. Easily one of the most Machiavellian of all literary characters, his imagery is saturated in the tropes of mind reading. He has enormous black staring eyes that seem to follow you everywhere, from telescreen or poster. He has an extremely ambiguous smile under his black moustache, a smile about which people speculate endlessly. Of course he is watching you wherever you are, and he has infinite power, infinite knowledge. He also has levitated out of his milieu to become a powerful cultural shorthand; all anybody has to do is say Big Brother and a myriad of associations come into play, if not strictly from Orwell, at least in the spirit he intended. So Big Brother meets the test for a highly Machiavellian literary character whose aura is rich in mind reading and who has worked inside people's heads. Why him?

Obviously, he represents the fear of totalitarianism and the dissociation of sensibility that is the hallmark of modern life. He personifies an omniscient force field, the belief in which has tempted a long line of thinkers, on the left and the right, into spasms of paranoia about supra-individual powers to which we are all subject. He also represents the total inversion of two mind-reading imperatives:

our twin obsessions with other people's consciences and with the sort of social information that makes a difference to our interests.

One of the best-known psychology experiments of the past twenty-five years shows that people have minds uniquely adapted to reasoning about other people's consciences (in the most expansive sense). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Leda Cosmides and John Tooby revisited a famous experiment from the 1960s about how people reason. The earlier experiment, called the Wason selection task, showed that people reason extremely poorly when asked to detect logical violations of if/then rules. So, for example, people only selected the right answer 25 percent of the time on the following test:

> Part of your new job for the City of Cambridge is to study the demographics of transportation. You read a previously done report on the habits of Cambridge residents that says: "If a person goes into Boston, then that person takes the subway."
>
> The cards below have information about four Cambridge residents. Each card represents one person. One side of a card tells where a person went, and the other side of the card tells how that person got there. Indicate only those card(s) you definitely need to turn over to see if any of these people violate this rule.
>
> Boston Arlington Subway Cab
>
> From a logical point of view, the rule has been violated whenever someone goes to Boston without taking the subway. Hence the logically correct answer is to turn over the Boston card (to see if this person took the subway) and the cab card (to see if the person taking the cab went to Boston). More generally, for a rule of the form If P then Q, one should turn over the cards that represent the values P and not-Q. (Cosmides and Tooby 1997)

On the other hand, when the test is changed so that it now detects whether somebody has violated a norm of social exchange, success rates shot up to between 65 and 80 percent. Here is an example (taken from the Wadsworth cognitive science lab online). You told somebody that if they borrowed your car they had to fill up the gas tank. Which two of the following four cards would you need to turn over to discover whether they had followed the rule?

| Borrowed Car | Did Not Borrow Car | Full Gas Tank | Empty Gas Tank |
|---|---|---|---|

The answer is rather intuitive: you would need to turn over the first and the fourth (CogLab).

For Cosmides and Tooby, the fact that "people who ordinarily cannot detect violations of if/then rules can do so easily and accurately when that violation represents cheating in a situation of social exchange" is evidence for domain-specific "social contract algorithms" (ibid. 1997). Furthermore, they claim that these results are not culturally specific:

> Everywhere it has been tested (adults in the US, UK, Germany, Italy, France, Hong Kong schoolchildren in Ecuador, Shiwiar hunter-horticulturalist in the Ecuadorian Amazon), people do not treat social exchange problems as equivalent to other kinds of reasoning problems. Their minds distinguish social exchange contents, and reason as if they were translating these situations into representational primitives such as "benefit," "cost," "obligation," "entitlement," "intentional," and "agent." Indeed, the relevant inference procedures are not activated unless the subject is represented the situation is one in which one is entitled to benefit only if one has satisfied a requirement. (Ibid.)

Let us suppose that Cosmides and Tooby are right and that our reasoning capacities are much better adapted to social exchange problems than to general-purpose questions of logic. Under those conditions, the representations that spread most easily would have to slake our thirst for social information. Here is my hypothesis. Literary characters circulate, levitate, and generally become famous because they help us reason about the social contract under conditions of imperfect access to relevant information.

Here is the claim. We reason quickly and frugally about social information, yet we have to do so with imperfect knowledge. Reasoning about the social contract is a matter of working through issues about conscience, authority, trustworthiness, hypocrisy, and the risk of being cheated. Many of the characters on my initial list, chosen because they are well known in general, are also well known for having or provoking crises of conscience. What is conscience, after all, but a set of inward qualities that mind reading seems uniquely designed to discover? Let me canvass a few definitions.

"Psychologically speaking," writes Martha Stout, "conscience is a sense of obligation ultimately based in an emotional attachment to another living creature (often but not always the human being), or to a group of human beings, or even in some cases to humanity as a whole" (Stout 2005, 26). Stout is a psychologist who has made a career of treating people who have been victimized by sociopaths, those who lack a sense of conscience. Her definition captures the sense of tenderness that can foster obligation between people. But if we look, even briefly, into the history of the concept, we can see immediately that it contains

many shades of darker meanings (Lukacher 1994). Conscience historically entails strongly normative—even punitive or daemonic—elements. Conscience can mean inward knowledge, consciousness of right and wrong, sense of fairness, and the practice of or conformity to what is right (*OED*). Mind reading is the capacity to detect these elements in other people, especially their inner convictions and their sense of right and wrong.

As for having to reason under conditions of imperfect access to relevant social information, any social contact entails the risk that other people can hide things that we might want to know. Pascal Boyer, an anthropologist of religion, claims that humans invented gods in large measure to control for that risk. "Humans," he writes "generally spend a great deal of time and energy wondering whether other people have access to some information that is strategic from their own standpoint, wondering what inferences intentions, plans, etc. these other people draw from that information, trying to control their access to such information and trying to monitor and influence their inferences on the basis of such information. All these complex calculations are based on the assumption that our own and other agents' access to strategic information is complex and generally imperfect" (Boyer 2001, 155). Gods and spirits, he claims, often resemble humans except that they have full access to relevant social information, rather than—like us—merely limited access. And many famous literary characters, such as Sherlock Holmes, are more like gods than humans in that their access to relevant social information is distinctly heightened. (I explore the concept of reasoning under informational disadvantages at greater length in Chapter 4.)

Back to Big Brother. He perverts both mind-reading functions: the search for conscience and our interest in social information. Big Brother turns the sources of obligation and love into tools of neurotic torture. He is a modernist avatar of those ancient monsters, the Furies, about whom the novelist Donna Tartt writes, "And how did they drive people mad? They turned up the volume of the inner monologue, magnified qualities already present to great excess, made people so much themselves that they couldn't stand it" (Tartt 1992, 35). To survive in Oceana, a citizen has to monitor his every thought, down to the smallest flicker, and he has to monitor (with little success) the thoughts of other people (O'Brien wears darkened glasses—all the better to keep other people from reading his mind). The anxiety brought on by these activities is leavened by no pleasure, no interest, and no curiosity. In the regime of Big Brother, you search other people's minds and your own for glints of rebellion or apostasy, and the search is literally a matter of life or death. Yet none of the scanning makes a bit of difference. The

question of whether you are a rebel or an apostate, or whether your neighbors are, is already known to the thought police and to Big Brother himself. So scan you must, but it will do you no good.

Let's leave Oceana and return to England and, at the same time, travel down a very familiar bit of historical track: the rise of the novel. Mind reading is something most people can do competently. It is universal and elastic, and fictional narratives are turbo machines to trigger it—or at least that's what they become as the novel grows more complex and serious over the decades. Literary examples eventually start to dance on the far, dizzying edge of what is cognitively possible. They are pushed there by the rise of a modern media culture that also puts greater pressure on mind-reading skills by asking people to keep track of an infinite number of other minds. So mind reading is an evolved cognitive process that is subject to change under different historical and economic conditions.

This sort of plasticity is familiar from the biological world. Stanford neurobiologist Robert Sapolsky has pioneered research in plasticity, measuring variable hormonal markers in a troop of baboons as their status within the group changes. Perhaps more relevant, the German psychologist Gerd Gigerenzer has investigated the rule-of-thumb mental heuristics that we use in decision making of all kinds, including moral and social decision making. Some mental heuristics are both fixed and variable. To take one of his simpler examples, we use a gaze heuristic when we intercept flying objects such as balls. Rather than compute complex mathematical formulas, we run some version of this rule: "Fix your gaze on the ball, start running, and adjust your running speed so that the image of the ball rises at a constant rate" (Gigerenzer 2007, 11).

Baseball players shagging fly balls and dogs catching Frisbees on the beach use this rule of thumb without knowing it. Yet the skills vary greatly and can be honed with practice. Here is an analogy. People with healthy brains have a gaze heuristic installed as a matter of course. Some of us might never use it while others get it working at a perfect pitch. Suppose we find ourselves thrown into a world where catching objects on the fly is a necessary social grace. Most people do just fine running back and forth and snagging bits of flotsam from the air. Mixed in among us are a few people with super skills and a few who are rather clumsy. One day everything starts speeding up. Why? Some waggish fellows have stuck bits of flubber to the flotsam. Now everyone's skills need to get better in a hurry; even the really clumsy people have to make a few catches here and there. Meanwhile, over on the far edge of the field, a few people—call them

a vanguard—have invented a way of catching everything one-handed behind their back. This fable could be told about any cultural innovation. Take a skill, throw in a ratchet and some selection pressure, and pretty soon the skill gets sharper all around.

So it is with mind reading and the rise of the novel. Both reasoning about social information and having to do so with little access to other people's consciences demand mind-reading skills. But those skills can be honed. The rise of the novel in Britain was a period of rapid change in narrative prose fiction. I have already touched on some of this. The Restoration of Charles II and the later Stuart era saw a sharp increase in the rate at which texts were published. Fictional works made up an ever-greater share of the total (see Letellier 2003, 549ff.). The later Stuart period also saw the rise of party politics. People chose sides. They drew caricatures of political heroes and villains. As caricature became more common, people saw how political rhetoric feeds on lies. The culture found itself awash in "uncertainty about the nature of truth, the stability of meaning, the sincerity of public words and how to discern lies" (Knights 2006, 276). Lying of all kinds, but especially political lying, featured prominently in many books and pamphlets (e.g., *The Art of Political Lying,* by John Arbuthnot), and because early fictions emerged from this potent brew, fiction, credit, and commerce fed on each other. Bubbling under the surface is distrust: distrust of the makers of fictions, distrust of the stories, distrust that other readers won't be taken in. Such anxieties stew in prefaces and asides of fiction after fiction from the period. And then modern literary characters began to circulate.

The first characters came out of the court. They were barely disguised satires on political celebrities. Dryden's character Zimri, a portrait of George Villiers, the second duke of Buckingham, was a model for later portraits of venal, corrupt, and two-faced politicians, including Joseph Addison and Lord Hervey in Pope's *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* (1735). Nobody could resist King Charles II, the "Merry Monarch," who was graced by bawdy, skeptical, lustful, and adoring poems and tracts. (Even now he stars in several lush films about the clash between puritans and libertines.)

The best of these portraits was drawn by Aphra Behn, an actress, playwright, dramatist, and spy who was also a high Tory and an ardent monarchist. Behn turned Charles II into one of the strangest characters in the history of the early novel, an enslaved African Prince named Oroonoko. Oroonoko is a young warrior in Coromantien on the gold-trading coast of modern Ghana. The grandson of the country's doddery king, Oroonoko is handsome and brave. Behn portrays

him as a stock hero from the heroic/tragic drama of her period, with one important difference—he is black. Here is how she describes him:

> His face was not of that brown, rusty black of which most that nation are, but a perfect ebony, or polished jet. His eyes were the most awful that could be seen and very piercing; the white of 'em being like snow, as were his teeth. His nose was rising and Roman, instead of African and flat. His mouth, the finest shaped that could be seen; far from those great turned lips, which are so natural to the rest of the Negroes. The whole proportion and air of his face was so noble, and exactly formed, that, bating his color, there could be nothing in nature more beautiful, agreeable and handsome. There was no one grace wanting, that bears the standard of true beauty: his hair came down to his shoulders, by the aids of art; which was, by pulling it out with a quill, and keeping it combed; of which he took particular care. (Behn 1997, 13–24)

Behn could be thinking of any one of the great court portraits of Charles II by Van Dyck or Lely or Isaac Fuller, all of which show the king's shiny black hair. But she makes his skin black. But his skin tone is fake, as Behn stresses. It is opaque, shiny, and artistic—perhaps, as Catherine Gallagher has argued, it is black like the ink of writing (Gallagher 1994, 69). Oroonoko's fake skin tone has two meanings. The first half of the novel is set in Oroonoko's native country of Coromantien, where his bossy grandfather holds sway. The people of Coromantien are slave traders, but they only sell the enemies they have captured in war. Their sense of honor is absolute and so is their system of patriarchal dominance, a system that Oroonoko himself strains against. He falls in love with a fair princess, Imoinda, but his grandfather wants her as his bride, and Oroonoko has to give her up. Eventually he is tricked into slavery by some white slave traders and taken to Surinam, the country in South America later known as Dutch Guyana. There he finds a white culture that is awash in liars. The whites of Surinam break their promises, have no honor, and worship a distant, abstract god.

Oroonoko is shocked to find out that white people dominate each other by mind games rather than by force. In coming to the new world, he has retraced the story of European culture in the seventeenth century from status to contract. He moves from a fixed social station to a world where status is up for grabs. The Christian God of the new world seems not in the least bit moral. So-called moral life centers on trading, credit, promises, and contracts, most of which end up broken. Meanwhile, Oroonoko's own romantic past, rooted in despotic kings and their absolute decrees, is called (O incomparable Aphra) rather "novel" by one

of the new world's white characters. Behn's witty point is that Oroonoko has become a fictional character by moving from the old world to the new.

Aphra Behn may have been sending a message to her former patron, King Charles II. Charles Stuart was an active and dedicated slave trader, the charter member, with his brother the duke of York, of the Royal African Trading Company. The Royal African Trading Company had a monopoly on slave trading from the West Indies, and during its tenure close to twenty thousand slaves were imported to England (though this number would be dwarfed by the hundreds of thousands imported to England once the slave trading market opened up to private enterprise in 1698) (Louis et al. 1998, 259). The slave-trading business, though lucrative, was, it now appears, not the enormous engine of eighteenth-century British prosperity that it was once thought to have been (Morgan 2001, 40–41). But in one sense its impact was visible and immediate. The gold guinea coin was introduced into circulation in 1663. The obverse featured King Charles II's head, crowned with a laurel wreath. The common term for a slave trader was a guinea trader. A historical commonplace was that every man and woman who walked around London with a guinea in his or her pocket was also, therefore, a guinea trader. These coins were obvious reminders of where the country's wealth was coming from and equally obvious reminders of how the head of state was sponsoring this trading enterprise.

Why did Behn write such a story? She wrote it to show the king where his slave trading would lead him—into lies, broken promises, and botched credit. In the end, Oroonoko kills himself, his wife, and their unborn baby rather than live in slavery under the whites. His death is noble and heroic. He cuts his skin from his body so that he looks like "a death's head blacked over." Behn here contrasts Charles II with his father, executed in front of the crowd at Whitehall on January 30, 1649. Far better, she thinks, to opt out of a system of royal slavery. Both kings dealt with a hostile Puritan parliament. Charles I chose to fight and die. His son chose to prune the monarchy. Behn's message is blunt: Charles II is a modern, commercial man and a slave trader. In choosing this path, he has morally sold himself into slavery.

Behn's story is a mix of fantasy and reality. She puts herself squarely into the story, even mentioning current events in London. She seems quite relaxed about it all—worrying about fiction is not in her plan. She wants to catch the conscience of the king. She has shown how the novel will emerge, from a global trading system in which the modern subject sits uneasily like a royal slave. Let me go back for a moment to the world of gaze heuristics. Who in this allegory is the vanguard? Is it novelists, writers, and provocateurs like Behn? Or is it the fictional

among us, the kings, aristocrats, actors, icons, celebrities, and all around hotties whose psychic space gets mixed up with ours? Aphra Behn likes to stir things up, to throw feathers in the air and see where the wind blows them. She and her fellow novelists are the vanguard, dancing and spinning and playing on the edge. But perhaps the medium is the message.

# *The Literary Endowment*

## Five Mind-Reading Turns

Let us consider some examples of mind reading in literature. They circle around the idea of Machiavellian intelligence, meaning that they play on our need to fathom the deepest motivations of other people. This chapter is divided into five short parts, or turns. They are connected, but the core is "Machiavellian Narratives," where I weave several strands of my argument into a broader question: Why are some literary narratives so fascinating? or, What are the mechanisms that trigger our interest? Mind reading is an ordinary human capacity that is both evolved and elastic.

## Four Openings

Literary narratives are like antique jalopies on a highway crowded with SUVs. Messages now fly at us so thick and fast that there is simply no way we can process them. Yet literature makes heavy demands on our processing capacities; the speed of our media culture may threaten a crucial element of how we read. Under threat is our ability to combine and add, to stitch together our own interpretation of what we read, since in a Google universe floods of information are present at the click of a button, and we do not so much have to put it all together as just surf along the top to some other piece. But this problem has really always faced and gripped literary narratives: how can they command our attention? Attention is a key part of our mammalian intensity. As a species, we thrive on attention and are particularly attuned to it. Attention is what economists call a "good"—a scarce resource. Attention is like money: we can't live without it. Massive numbers

of metaphors show how much we need it and how anguished we feel when it dries up. *I gave her my full attention. I need you to pay attention to me. She cut me dead.* Withholding attention can be a weapon of emotional murder.

Like human beings, literary narratives have evolved to get attention, adapting their wiles to our social brains. Here are three openings from fictions by George Eliot, Franz Kafka, and John Sandford.

> Was she beautiful or not beautiful? And what was the secret of form or expression which gave the dynamic quality to her glance? Was the good or the evil genius dominant in those beams? Probably the evil; else why was the effect that of unrest rather than of undisturbed charm? Why was the wish to look again felt as coercion and not as a longing in which the whole being consents?
>
> She who raised these questions in Daniel Deronda's mind was occupied in gambling: not in the open air under a southern sky, tossing coppers on a ruined wall, with rags about her limbs; but in one of those splendid resorts which the enlightenment of ages has prepared for the same species of pleasure at a heavy cost of gilt mouldings, dark-toned colour and chubby nudities, all correspondingly heavy forming a suitable condenser for human breath belonging, in great part, to the highest fashion, and not easily procurable to be breathed in elsewhere in the like proportion, at least by persons of little fashion. (*Daniel Deronda,* 1876)

> One morning, as Gregor Samsa was waking up from anxious dreams, he discovered that in bed he had been changed into a monstrous verminous bug. He lay on his armour-hard back and saw, as he lifted his head up a little, his brown, arched abdomen divided up into rigid bow-like sections. From this height the blanket, just about ready to slide off completely, could hardly stay in place. His numerous legs, pitifully thin in comparison to the rest of his circumference, flickered helplessly before his eyes.
>
> "What's happened to me," he thought. It was no dream. His room, a proper room for a human being, only somewhat too small, lay quietly between the four well-known walls. Above the table, on which an unpacked collection of sample cloth goods was spread out—Samsa was a traveling salesman—hung the picture which he had cut out of an illustrated magazine a little while ago and set in a pretty gilt frame. It was a picture of a woman with a fur hat and a

fur boa. She sat erect there, lifting up in the direction of the viewer a solid fur muff into which her entire forearm had disappeared.

Gregor's glance then turned to the window. The dreary weather—the rain drops were falling audibly down on the metal window ledge—made him quite melancholy. "Why don't I keep sleeping for a little while longer and forget all this foolishness," he thought. But this was entirely impractical, for he was used to sleeping on his right side, and in his present state he could not get himself into this position. No matter how hard he threw himself onto his right side, he always rolled onto his back again. He must have tried it a hundred times, closing his eyes so that he would not have to see the wriggling legs, and gave up only when he began to feel a light, dull pain in his side which he had never felt before. (*The Metamorphosis,* 1915)

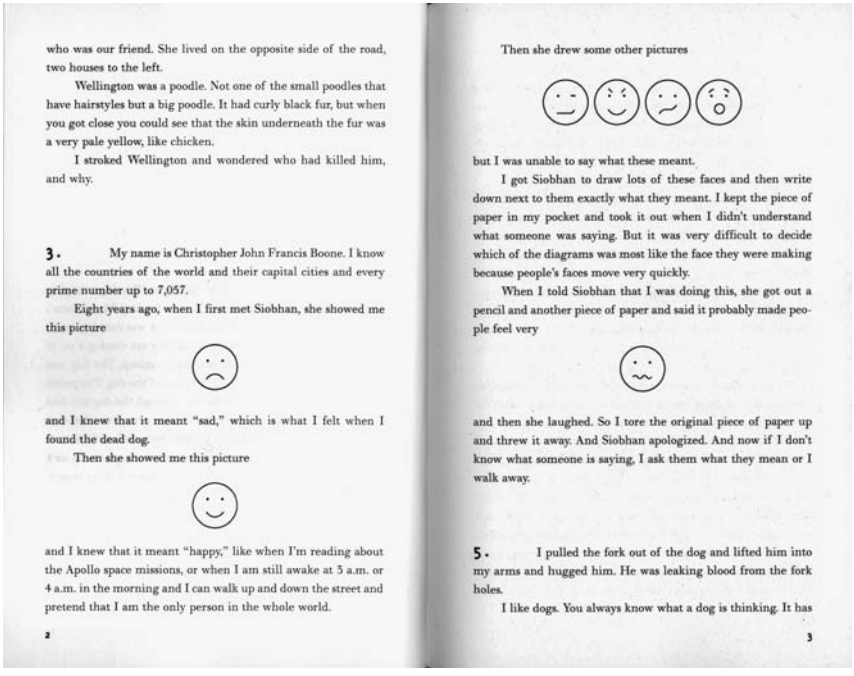
Despite the mist, she spent an hour working Chica, and working herself, and she smelled of it, mare-sweat and woman-sweat, with a tingle of Chanel no. 5. They'd turned down the trail from the south forty, easing along, and she could feel the mare's heart beating through her knees and thighs.

The mist hadn't felt cold while they were jumping, but now they were cooling off, and her cheeks and forehead were pink, and her knuckles were raw. A shower, she thought, would be nice, along with a hot sandwich and a cup of soup.

They'd just crossed the fence. She turned in the saddle to watch the gate relatch behind them, and saw the face in the tree line. There was no question that it was a face—and in a blink, it was gone, dissolving in the trees.

She turned away from it, casually, tried to capture an afterimage in her mind. A pale oval, truncated at top and bottom, with a dark trapezoid beneath the oval. The face of a man who'd been watching her through binoculars, she realized. The dark shape, the trapezoid, had been arms, joined at the binoculars, in a camouflage jacket. (*Dead Watch,* 2007)

Each of these examples invites the reader into the narrative by asking her to imagine an exchange of glances, a face looking at other faces. My fourth "opening" is an inverted example of the same tactic. It begins on the second page of Mark Haddon's excellent novel about a fifteen-year-old autistic boy named Christopher Boone, who has trouble recognizing emotions, so his friend and caretaker, Siobhan, draws pictures of faces for him.



who was our friend. She lived on the opposite side of the road, two houses to the left.

Wellington was a poodle. Not one of the small poodles that have hairstyles but a big poodle. It had curly black fur, but when you got close you could see that the skin underneath the fur was a very pale yellow, like chicken.

I stroked Wellington and wondered who had killed him, and why.

**3.** My name is Christopher John Francis Boone. I know all the countries of the world and their capital cities and every prime number up to 7,057.

Eight years ago, when I first met Siobhan, she showed me this picture

and I knew that it meant "sad," which is what I felt when I found the dead dog.

Then she showed me this picture

and I knew that it meant "happy," like when I'm reading about the Apollo space missions, or when I am still awake at 3 a.m. or 4 a.m. in the morning and I can walk up and down the street and pretend that I am the only person in the whole world.

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Then she drew some other pictures

but I was unable to say what these meant.

I got Siobhan to draw lots of these faces and then write down next to them exactly what they meant. I kept the piece of paper in my pocket and took it out when I didn't understand what someone was saying. But it was very difficult to decide which of the diagrams was most like the face they were making because people's faces move very quickly.

When I told Siobhan that I was doing this, she got out a pencil and another piece of paper and said it probably made people feel very

and then she laughed. So I tore the original piece of paper up and threw it away. And Siobhan apologized. And now if I don't know what someone is saying, I ask them what they mean or I walk away.

**5.** I pulled the fork out of the dog and lifted him into my arms and hugged him. He was leaking blood from the fork holes.

I like dogs. You always know what a dog is thinking. It has

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*Figure 1.* Mark Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 2–3.

Why this narrative device? What purchase does it hold over us? More specifically, why would writers as different from each other as George Eliot, one of the greatest English high-canonical novelists; John Sandford, a writer of popcorn thrillers; Franz Kafka, the high-modernist absurdist fantasist; and Mark Haddon, a dark renovator of the tradition of the English comic novel, use as their opening gambit this particular device? Now the task of any narrative, in whatever genre, is to grab and hold the reader's attention. Let's call this the problem of attentional focusing. Why solve it in this way?

Earlier I mentioned Christopher Tyler's astonishing finding about portraits: the vertical centerline often runs through one of the subject's eyeballs. Try it yourself. Call up any of the famous portraits by Caravaggio, Lucien Freud, or even Alfred Stieglitz's photographs of Georgia O'Keeffe from the 1920s. Artists converge on this principle over and over again—in portraits and even in fiction, where it is harder to pull off. Why?

Mind reading is the most important cognitive mechanism of human sociability, and literature obsessively reflects that mechanism. This sentence, alas, is unlikely to shed much light. It is like saying that literary narratives obsessively reflect our capacity for *language.* Still, I mean it to paint a broad intuitive canvass, which I then hope to fill in with firmer arguments and examples. Mind reading underlies the human capacity for acquiring language, for fictional play, for telling stories, for fathoming intentions, for deceiving, for sympathy, for identifying, for running inferences in a mode decoupled from observation and hence for imagining pretend scenarios, and for handling complex multivocal narratives—to mention only a few.

The trouble with mind-reading problems in literature is that they are like God: everywhere and nowhere. They lie deep in literary experience. Mind reading can be simple, a meaningful exchange of glances on which something rather vaguely depends. Here is a short passage from an Edith Wharton 1925 novella, *The Mother's Recompense,* describing a highly charged scene between a woman who is no longer young and her maid: "She snatched up the telegram, and then turned her head toward the wall, seeking, while she read, to hide her face from [the maid]. The maid, on whom such hints were never lost, immediately transferred her attention to the dressing-table, skillfully deploying the glittering troops on the last battlefield where the daily struggle still renewed itself" (Wharton 1986, 7). The scene, small and pivotal, is like a hologram. All the action takes place through eye contact. Eye contact signifies the maid's awareness that the woman knows that she knows—what? We don't even know yet! The maid withdraws her attention back to the dressing table, arranged like Belinda's dressing table in Pope's *Rape of the Lock,* in a mock-epic battle.

Mind-reading problems crop up when a cognitively flexible animal is thrown into the middle of things and forced to steer across the shoals and reaches to the shore. She faces tests of practical agency, puzzles in her social world, problems to hand. She finds herself in a plight or, usually, a whole series of them. Towards some aspects of her plight she is blind and towards others she is knowing. Each phase of her plight offers her a chance to adjust her mind, to turn the screw. The hurdles she faces are other minds or mindlike entities, and how she makes sense of those other minds determines how well she navigates her way.

Here, for example, is a passage from a masterful novella by the Bosnian writer Aleksandar Hemon. The novella, *Blind Jozef Pronek and Dead Souls* (2001), tells the story of a young Sarajevan writer who, during the time of the Bosnian war, wanders to Chicago to find a woman he once briefly met, moves in with her, and descends into ever-lower states of humiliation and decay before landing a good and meaningful job cleaning houses:

> In that manner, he became a true professional. His wage rose from $6 per hour to $6.50 per hour, and Rhee allowed him to go occasionally on "solo missions"—cleaning Lincoln Park or Gold Coast condos alone.
>
> Oh boy, did he like that: entering the apartment and the owner's scent—perfume, shower gel, shampoo, deodorant—still lingering; furniture summoned around the TV, with a couple of proud dressers backed against the wall; maps of the world, ochre (which meant old), with dragons dipping in the corners; Ansel Adams's photos of vapid gray desert valleys; small colorful carpets stretching on the floors like lazy, content cats; a tall CD rack, the Sears Tower of the condo; a staunch bookshelf with books standing straight like soldiers at attention: Independence Day; Seven Spiritual Laws of Growth; What's Inside—A User's Guide to the Soul; The Client; The Heart of Darkness; Eating in Tuscany; Investing Today; Mind for Dummies; Theodore Roosevelt: A Life; The Alienist, etc.; flower pots hanging from the ceiling like miniature gardens of Babylon; an array of family pictures on the piano gazing slightly upward, like afternoon sunflowers; a bowl full of trinkets: pennies, marbles, matchboxes, business cards, condoms, paper clips; a wine rack with black bottles, like a hearse; a sign on the wall saying "No Parking—Tow Zone"; a softball trophy with a golden figure on a tiny pedestal throwing a golden marble ("Grace Cup '92"); the computer and its black screen closely monitoring his every move. (Hemon 2001, 195)

Pronek encounters an array of minds or mindlike entities—"furniture summoned around the TV," "proud dressers," "small colorful carpets stretching on the floors like lazy, content cats," "a staunch bookshelf with books standing straight like soldiers at attention." A giant mind seems to hover over this Gold Coast condo and spread itself onto objects, making itself felt as metaphor, sometimes appearing flattened in a book (*Mind for Dummies, The Alienist*), sometimes taking things over ("the computer and its black screen closely monitoring his every move"). While the literary effects of this quasi-hidden mind are relatively easy to describe (pathos, comedy, perhaps a touch of Stephen King in that computer monitor), the point of the whole conceit is harder to fathom. The owner of the Gold Coast condo has familiar needs and wants—to get rich, to find out who he is, to eat well in Tuscany—and he has chosen some guides to help him—the rough rider Teddy Roosevelt, John Grisham, maybe even that rootless man of the world Marlowe. Whose mind is the medium through which all of these bits of mind stuff float? Does Pronek get a special purchase on it all, or is he just another piece of mind stuff? Why use mind as a medium at all?

Even light fiction is drawn to mind-reading problems. Consider some jetsam

from the great bookstore wash. Julian Barnes's *Love, Etc.* is a light bagatelle, a witty three-hander, a trifling social farce with the Barnesian bite. It is the story of a love triangle between two men and a woman, all growing older, all slightly bitter about what life hasn't given them. Between these three people there are intrigues, betrayals, violence, sadness, a deep history of mistrust. The novel is meant to be consumed quickly. Nonetheless, Barnes has put into it many of the key elements of what I call a high mind-reading novel. The presence of these elements signals a writer's ambitions. Serious writers believe they make special claims on our mind-reading capacities. Here, for example, is a metaphor that mimics a condition called mind blindness (see Chapter 7), which is, in a nutshell, a subtle refusal to engage in mind reading. A character talks about his dead father who used to beat him,

> all because I looked like my mother. All because she died when I was six and he couldn't bear the resemblance. Oh, there were spurious pretexts: my studied insolence—my impromptu insolence as well—plus a certain juvenile zeal on my part for arson, but I knew what it was about. He was a cold fish, my father. The old halibut smoked a pipe to conceal the piscine odours. And then, one day, his scales dried out and his find turned stiff as a cast-off paintbrush. He had expressed a yen for cremation, but I had him buried at the crossroads with a stake through his heart, just to make sure. (Barnes 2000, 28)

The metaphor is meant to put stress on a reader's mind-reading capacities in several ways. A cold fish is a dead metaphor, but Barnes has revived it. The cold fish is a picture of a dead mind surrounded by a live one—a grown man mourning and not mourning the little boy who loved the father who beat him. The metaphor is a mind-stripping technique, a dehumanizing trope that connects even as it distances. Literary techniques that harvest mind reading are usually meant to foster insight and psychological depth. But even without an elaborate analysis of the novel's mind-reading tropes, you could know that this was Barnes's ambition simply by reading the novel's blurbs, which trumpet its intimacy and psychological realism. Barnes makes rather run-of-the-mill claims on our mind-reading capacities and in so doing gets credit for innovating in a mode that has been growing in fiction at least since Balzac, James, and Flaubert.

Noticing mind-reading problems in fiction is one thing, but naming them is another. Fortunately, the field of cognitive poetics is now developing some hypotheses. Here is an example. Drawing directly on his experiments into how many orders of intentionality people are able to keep track of, Robin Dunbar says this about fiction:

> The fact that people seem to experience considerable difficulty with fifth-order intentional statements but not fourth-order ones may explain why writing fiction is much harder than reading it, and may thus in part explain why good writers are considerably less common than good readers. In other words, a novelist writing about relationships between three people has to "intend that the reader think that character A supposes that character B wants character C to believe that . . . " —five orders of intentionality. The reader, in contrast has a much easier task: he or she merely has to "think that A supposes that B wants C to believe that . . . " —four orders of intentionality. Sophisticated literature (i.e. something other than pure narrative) thus places very considerable demands on both writer and reader, but the demands placed on the writer are of an order that starts to create a very significant load on most people's cognitive ability. (Dunbar 2000, 241)

Dunbar suggests that people can bring different mind-reading capacities to the same fiction and, indeed, that the same fiction can make asymmetrical demands. Dunbar distinguishes between readers of fiction, who happily follow along up to four orders of intentionality, and authors, who have to push themselves into fifth-order intentionality and beyond. If Dunbar's hypothesis is confirmed, it will lend (surprising) credence to a school of formalist theory running from Plato to the present day that holds that authorship is a special kind of agency.

We can also imagine a range of mind-reading demands *within* a single fiction. Consider the difference between literary situations in which two characters interact and one in which three characters interact. The first requires fourth-order intentionality ("the writer wants the reader to believe that character A thinks that character B intends to do something"), while the second requires fifth-order intentionality ("a novelist writing about relationships between three people has to 'intend that he reader think that character A supposes that character B wants character C to believe that . . .'"). Ratcheting up the levels of intentionality increases the cognitive load on both writer and reader alike.

Writers have long confirmed Dunbar's ideas in talking about their craft. The most famous literary example of Dunbar's principle is Henry James's haunting image of "the house of fiction" in his preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881). The house of fiction has a million windows, "every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will." At each window

> stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-glass, which forms, again and again, for observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person

> making use of it an impression distinct from every other. He and his neighbours are watching the same show, but one seeing more where the other sees less, one seeing black where the other sees white, one seeing big where the other sees small, one seeing coarse where the other sees fine. . . . But they are, singly or together, as nothing without the posted presence of the watcher—without, in other words, the consciousness of the artist. (James 2003, 45–46)

What is this passage, really, if not a late romantic manifesto? The young master enters his middle period and tells us that he has mastered his form. James also confirms Dunbar's idea that a novelist requires at least fifth-order intentionality to be able to hold the views of characters and reader in tension. James even imagines that the orders of intentionality sort themselves out through eye contact.

Dunbar's insight has led to a genuine breakthrough in literary analysis: writers can use style to ratchet up the levels of intentionality to the point that their prose becomes psychologically uncomfortable. Lisa Zunshine has published several brilliant, wide-ranging, and indispensable studies of mind reading in fiction, most recently in her groundbreaking book *Why We Read Fiction: Mind Reading and the Novel.* She offers an analysis of the role of mind reading in Virginia Woolf's 1929 novel *Mrs. Dalloway.* Mrs. Dalloway is an excellent choice because it is apparently more like a realistic novel than Woolf's late experimental fiction, for example, *The Waves,* which is self-consciously poetic. Here is part of Zunshine's account:

> Hemingway famously made it his trademark to under represent his protagonists' feelings by forcing the majority of his characters' physical actions to stand in for mental states (for example, as in the ending of *A Farewell to Arms:* "After a while I went out and left the hospital and walked back to the hotel in the rain" [314]). Hemingway could afford such a deliberate, and in its own way highly elaborate, under telling for the same reason that Woolf could afford to let Peter [Walsh]'s trembling "speak for itself": our evolved cognitive tendency to assume that there must be a mental stance behind each physical action and our striving to represent to ourselves that possible mental stance even when the author has left us with the absolute minimum of necessary cues for constructing such a representation.
>
> It is thus when we start to inquire into how writers of fiction experiment with our mind-reading ability, and perhaps even push it further, that the insights offered by cognitive scientists become particularly pertinent. Although cognitive scientists' investigation of ToM is very much a project-in-progress, literary scholars have enough carefully documented research already available to them to begin asking such questions as: is it possible that literary narratives

> train our capacity for mind reading and also tests its limits? How do different cultural-historical milieus encourage different literary explorations of this capacity? How do different genres? Speculative and tentative as the answers to these questions could only be at this point, they mark the possibility of a genuine interaction between cognitive psychology and literary studies, with both fields having much to offer to each other. (Zunshine 2003, 277)

Zunshine's insights are incredibly thought provoking. She imagines Woolf and Hemingway as genial guides, so confident of their craft that they lay out the sentences and let us wriggle onto them like hooks. They know we will bite because they know how our minds work. When they want to experiment, they knock us out of our comfort zone by increasing the pressure on our mind-reading abilities.

## Free Indirect Discourse

Zunshine draws her examples from modern fiction. But even the oldest fictions experiment with mind reading. Whenever I teach Chaucer I grow absorbed in the plights his characters face. The characters are mental riddles wrapped in moral mysteries inside erotic enigmas—thought experiments, case histories, the world's first true literary characters (says Harold Bloom of the Pardoner). Chaucer carefully designs their worries not to be cleared up too quickly—little worlds made cunningly, symbol rather than allegory. Take Chaucer's Monk in the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales.* A sleek, fat fellow with big rolling eyes and large belly; why he became a monk is a mystery. His erotic life is palpable. He loves to hunt and drink, and he doesn't like to work. What's more, he tells a pretty good story about why his life is agreeable enough. This story, like all of his thoughts, follows in the track of animals.

> He yaf nat of that text a pulled hen,
> That seith that hunters ben nat hooly men,
> Ne that a monk, whan he is recchelees
> Is likned til a fissh that is waterlees —
> This is to seyn, a monk out of his cloystre.
> But thilke text heeld he nat worth an oystre;
> And I seyde his opinion was good.
> What sholde he studie and make hymselven wood,
> Upon a book in cloystre alwey to poure,
> Or swynken with his handes, and laboure,

> As Austyn bit? How shal the world be served?
> Lat Austyn have his swynk to hym reserved! (Lines 177–188)
>
> (He didn't give a pulled hen for that text that says that hunters are not holy men, nor that a monk out of his order is like a fish out of water—that is to say, a monk out of his cloister. But that text he held not worth an oyster, and I say his opinion was good. Why should he study and make himself mad, always poring over a book in his cloister, or working with his hands and laboring as St. Augustine bid? How shall the world be served? Let St. Augustine keep his work to himself!)

This portrait is memorable for several reasons (and not just for Chaucer's quite bawdy puns). In line 7, a strange third-person voice comes along to defend the monk against what seems to be his own conscience, taking his side against that strict taskmaster St. Augustine, who is all "swynk" (work) and no play. The monk has, as one always does, baroque tales about why he is right. But he is also luckier than most of us in that these tales are backed up by an answering voice from the outside world: "I said his opinion was good./Why should he study and make himself mad? How shall the world be served?" That line—"why should he study and make himself mad?"—is a startling, early, but entirely compelling example of the literary technique known as free indirect discourse. Free indirect discourse holds the narrative voice somewhere in between the first and the third person. But it is not benign. Writers use it to slice the heads off their characters.

Free indirect discourse flows from novels of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries*: La Princesse de Cleves,* by Madame de Lafayette, and *The Castle of Otranto,* by Horace Walpole. William Godwin and Jane Austen picked it up. Later, George Eliot and Gustave Flaubert sparked technical and psychological fireworks with it. Henry James brought it to such a pitch of perfection that he wove an entire prose style in it—subtle, undetectable, and universal. Because Jane Austen uses it in her more normative moods, some critics have viewed it with suspicion. William Galperin calls Austen's use of it "an especially sinister instrument of coercion" (2003, 10). But the people who should fear it are not those who seek to free us from the tyranny of social norms but the characters whose grievance it voices. No character ever comes off well when free indirect discourse tries to lend a hand. Far from grasping the all too tempting megaphone for his inmost views, a literary character should be very wary indeed of how those views will sound when shown in this tricky light. Just ask Chaucer's monk.

In fact, any character so tempted should realize that free indirect discourse isn't really about him; it is about us. Free indirect discourse is one of the major

literary techniques that writers use to put pressure on our mind-reading capacities. What is it and how does it work? In general, formal innovations reflect the importance of what we care about, to borrow a phrase from Harry Frankfurt. So imagine that there is a contest to see who can invent a more successful meme. I start a fad for taking off my clothes, wrapping myself up in barbed wire, and running around screaming. You design a black-and-white cartoon mouse whose face looks like a baby. Your baby-faced mouse sings and dances and talks in a cute squeaky voice. My barbed wire act is sublime and terrifying. We put it to a vote. I lose. Why? My fad is not reproducible, pleasurable, or meaningful. It brings neither joy nor clarity. The only possible advantage is a cultish one. Since my act is hard to imitate, I might attract some followers who are drawn to my superhuman capacity for pain and my hotline to values that only I can see. But on balance, my barbed-wire act will not spread very far—perhaps not even as far as the rash of imitative suicides that followed the publication of Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* in 1774 (to take another example of a self-limiting meme).

In practice, such contests are most typically fought between memes that are quite close to each other. For example, Franco Moretti has written a stunning essay on the competitors of Sherlock Holmes. He starts with a question. Of all the works of literary fiction written since the eighteenth century, only a vanishingly small number are still read today. How do some works of fiction (less than half of 1 percent) become canonized while everything else disappears? Rather surprisingly, the answer does not turn, as one might think, on the history of academic practices, since Moretti shows that academic canonicity follows social canonicity rather than the other way around. Instead, it is a question about what makes some works of literature more popular than others. Moretti chooses to address this question through a specific case history: writers of detective fiction in the late nineteenth century who "write more or less like" Arthur Conan Doyle "but not quite" (2000, 208). It may seem obvious to us now that Conan Doyle is a better writer than his immediate competitors, but it was not obvious at the time. Conan Doyle wrote for an intensely competitive marketplace that, like any other, was driven by consumer demand. Somehow, he hit on a winning formula: decodable and visible clues. This formula is what allowed him to outdistance his competitors. Writers who used no clues are "completely forgotten"; other writers who used clues but did not allow the reader to infer anything from them have also disappeared. Clues have their own remorseless logic in the marketplace: they are "formal choices that try to eradicate their competitors" (211).

Clues have to have special properties, however. They have to be visible to the reader as well as to the detective. The reader should be able to fantasize that she

can combine them to come up with the solution, although of course the detective always has some edge of reasoning ability. As a contrasting case, consider symptoms. Moretti finds that a group of stories that stage medical scenarios have disappeared just like those clueless detective stories. Why?

The stories in the second group ("symptoms") are interesting in another way: they don't pretend to have clues but replace them with something else. Symptoms, of course, are the very origin of clues: they are the "small details" of medical semiosis whose significance was pointed out to young Conan Doyle by Joseph Bell, the Edinburgh professor of medicine who was the model for Holmes. Basically, then, these stories replay the film backward. But there is a problem: "Clues are seldom coded, and their interpretation is frequently a matter of complex inference," writes Umberto Eco, "which makes criminal novels more interesting than the detection of pneumonia." Precisely. And just as clues are usually more interesting than symptoms, Holmes's cases are more interesting than the *Stories from the Diary of a Doc*tor or the *Adventures of a Man of Science*—and much more successful (ibid., 220).

Following Umberto Eco, Moretti concludes that clues, although more interesting than symptoms, are harder to interpret. The kind of reasoning required is more complex—symptoms are just too linear to capture our interest. I would argue that he has missed a crucial step. Surely the type of reasoning is at least as important as the degree of complexity. Crimes are more interesting than diseases because a crime is somebody's violation of the social contract, whereas the etiology of a disease is insufficiently social. If this seems too psychologically specific, consider Conan Doyle's alternative. Moretti shows that Conan Doyle did not hit on the clue formula all at once, and he may never have hit on it fully. What Moretti calls the "First Commandment of detective fiction," namely, that clues be decodable by the reader, did not become a strict formal necessity until the generation after Conan Doyle (in the work of Agatha Christie, especially). Conan Doyle's commitment to decodable clues seems to have been tempered by other, stronger commitments—to character, for one thing. Many of the Holmes stories contain clues that are visible only to Holmes. Moretti explains:

> Clues begin as attributes of the omniscient detective, I have said, and then turn into details open to the rational scrutiny of all. But if they are the former, they cannot be the latter: Holmes as Superman needs unintelligible clues to prove his superiority; decodable clues create a potential parity between him and the reader. The two uses are incompatible: they may coexist for a while, but in the long run they exclude each other. If Conan Doyle keeps "losing" clues,

> then, it's because part of him wants to lose them: they threaten Holmes's legend. He must choose, and he chooses Holmes. (Ibid., 216)

Half of the Holmes stories contain clues that the reader can decode (with Holmes's help), while half contain clues decodable only to Holmes. In fact, there is no difference in spirit between the two kinds of story, only a difference in technique. Both kinds of story show Conan Doyle trying to interest his readers in the same thing, namely, the workings of a powerful person's mind. He could not have known whether Holmes or Holmes-plus-decodable-clues would turn out to be more interesting, but his experiments are of a piece. Sherlock Holmes is a flawed genius, but unlike his evil doppelganger, Moriarty, he is no criminal mastermind. Clues that point to evil simply ratchet up the level of interest, which begins with the question of what somebody else is like. Conan Doyle oscillating between stories with Holmes and stories with clues may simply be oscillating between the specific question (what are powerful people like?) and the even more specific question (what are criminal masterminds like?).[1]

The history of literary forms is punctuated by turns just like this one, changes designed to get inside the mind and go along for the ride. The mind of man, says the narrator of Melville's *Benito Cereno,* is a subtle hive. Writers are always coming up with new ways of getting inside. These techniques, such as the one Moretti features, are rich in mind reading; they either require mindfulness or call attention to its presence. And so it is with free indirect discourse.

First some definitions. Free indirect discourse (in French, *style indirect libre*) is a technique for presenting a character's inner thoughts from a third-person point of view. In direct discourse, a character's thoughts are quoted directly: she thought, "I would like a second chocolate chip cookie with my coffee." In indirect discourse, grammatical markers are added and the tense is shifted: "She wanted a second chocolate chip cookie with her coffee." In free indirect discourse, the grammatical tags and all mental verbs are removed: "Why shouldn't she have another chocolate chip cookie with her coffee? There was nothing too harmful in that, and besides she was going to the gym later. B—— had been very restrained all summer, but what was life for if not to take a little pleasure once in a while? Her culture's weight obsession was all just phallogocentric, heteronormative patriarchal conditioning anyway!"

The grammatical tags are only a small part of the story. The bigger story is that free indirect discourse allows the novel to show consciousness without a first- or third-person narrator. Dorrit Cohn has coined the term *psycho-narration* for omniscient description. Psycho-narration "identifies both the subject-matter

and the activity it denotes (on the analogy to psychology, psychoanalysis)" (Cohn 1978, 11). Free indirect discourse sits "astride narration and quotation": it is "the technique for rendering a character's thought in his own idiom while maintaining the third-person reference and the basic tense of narration" (100). Cohn shows the way free indirect discourse provides a measure of psychological depth, but throughout her book she identifies it only *as* depth, as a mode of double-voiced consciousness especially aligned with sympathy and irony: "By leaving the relationship between words and thoughts latent, the narrated monologue casts a peculiarly penumbral light on the figural consciousness, suspending it on the threshold of verbalization in a manner that cannot be achieved by direct quotation. This ambiguity is unquestionably one reason why so many writers prefer the less direct technique" (103).

Critics have long hailed the technique. "I believe that free indirect style is the novel's one and only formal contribution to literature," writes Frances Ferguson (2000, 159). "Its development is of the highest importance to the history of the novel," writes Margaret Doody (1980, 287). John Bender (1995, 262) describes free indirect discourse as "the characteristic mechanism for securing the illusion of transparency that distinguishes the realist novel from the later eighteenth century onwards." It allows a writer to express sympathy and distance from her character at the same time. It demands of the reader a signal critical attention.

These days it is just the novelistic mode, so common that it is easy to overlook, like crabgrass. To find specimens, one only has to glance around. To narrate a monologue in the third person has gotten easy. Leafing at random through some of the novels on my bookshelf—*Being Dead,* by Jim Crace, *Waiting,* by Ha Jin, *Disgrace,* by J. M. Coetzee—I can find examples on every page. Here is a middle-aged woman from Crace's novel thinking about her marriage: "So many times she'd asked herself, Why has our love proved troublesome? [She] could count the ways. First, she was a warrior by nature, unafraid of battle, quick to raise her fists. Her husband was an appeaser, loath even to raise his voice" (Crace 2000, 142). After a lifetime of thinking about her husband's flaws, her thoughts now flow easily into their usual rut. These are easy thoughts, thoughts so stale by now that they just come naturally.

Most critics have written about the form, not the content. But form is only a trowel for planting mental seeds. I do not mean to slight the work on free indirect discourse in linguistics and stylistics, which has been impressive. Yet nobody has yet told a sustained story about form. In fact the strongest take—Ann Banfield's linguistic tour de force *Unspeakable Sentences* (1980)—fell upon the field like a cat among the pigeons, and the field has never fully recovered.

Here is Banfield's view. Sentences in narrated monologue are "unspeakable." They do not express any single point of view. They make claims that are backed up by no agent. Such sentences allow "the totality of a sentence's meaning [to] be attributed simultaneously to both a third person SELF and a narrator [and for] the two different readings [to] be contradictory" (Banfield 1982, 216). I agree with Banfield. Sentences that can be pinned to several points of view, even contradictory ones, are puzzling. But no property of these sentences will explain the paradox. Instead, we look to their effects on our minds.

Banfield makes free indirect discourse seem counterintuitive. That is interesting, but is it useful? Free indirect discourse mines and focuses attention. The relevant question is not How strange can we make this seem? but Why do authors do this? They do it to stimulate our mind-reading capacities. To get the two voices running together and apart, a reader has to be able to hold several strands in her mind at once, the sense that several points of view are embedded in each sentence. They do it, too, to signal that we are in the presence of mindfulness in general.

So, for example, Jane Austen begins to use free indirect discourse in an orderly way during a crucial scene in *Pride and Prejudice.* Elizabeth travels with her uncle and aunt, Mr. and Mrs. Gardner, into Derbyshire. Her aunt suggests they visit Pemberley, Mr. Darcy's stately home. When they enter the grounds, Elizabeth, who has already turned down a marriage proposal from Mr. Darcy, begins to have second thoughts. As she doubts herself, thoughts crowd into her head. Austen depicts her thinking as—well—thinking: "Elizabeth's mind was too full for conversation." Her mental turn triggers free indirect discourse, just as the mental turn itself was triggered by the weight of Pemberley on her psyche (later Elizabeth jokingly remarks to her sister Jane that she fell in love with Mr. Darcy when she saw his house). Here is the scene where it breaks out into the open:

> There was certainly at this moment, in Elizabeth's mind, a more gentle sensation towards the original than she had ever felt in the height of their acquaintance. *The commendation bestowed on him by Mrs. Reynolds was of no trifling nature. What praise is more valuable than the praise of an intelligent servant?* As a brother, a landlord, a master, she considered how many people's happiness were in his guardianship!—How much of pleasure or pain it was in his power to bestow!—How much of good or evil must be done by him! Every idea that had been brought forward by the housekeeper was favourable to his character, and as she stood before the canvas, on which he was represented, and fixed his eyes upon herself, she thought of his regard with a deeper sentiment of grati-

> tude than it had ever raised before; she remembered its warmth, and softened its impropriety of expression. (Austen 2003, 240)

In Austen, you can practically see a new technique being born under the incredible pressure of her art, under her desire to show what a mind is like when it comes in close contact with other minds. But you see something else, too: the way Austen fills up the technique with its own content. Free indirect discourse is much more than just a technique. It is a vehicle for bearing an emotional tone. What kind of tone? A tone of egotistical self-assertion. Machiavellian thoughts. Thoughts about one's own status and the status of those around one. Economic thoughts. Economics is often described as having to choose among scarce resources when your wants are unlimited. Free indirect discourse is the psycho-literary equivalent of economics. I return to this point in Chapter 8.

What does the psycho-literary equivalent of economics look like? Let me give some more examples, which reflect a strong general pattern.

1. George Eliot, *Middlemarch.* Fred Vincy is thinking about a debt he has incurred that he may need his father to pay off for him:

> But it was in the nature of fathers, Fred knew, to bully one about expenses: there was always a little storm over his extravagance if he had to disclose a debt, and Fred disliked bad weather within doors. He was too filial to be disrespectful to his father, and he bore the thunder with the certainty that it was transient; but in the mean time it was disagreeable to see his mother cry, and also to be obliged to look sulky instead of having fun; for Fred was so good-tempered that if he looked glum under scolding, it was chiefly for propriety's sake. The easier course plainly, was to renew the bill with a friend's signature. Why not? With the superfluous securities of hope at his command, there was no reason why he should not have increased other people's liabilities to any extent, but for the fact that men whose names were good for anything were usually pessimists, indisposed to believe that the universal order of things would necessarily be agreeable to an agreeable young gentleman. (245)

I have emphasized the moments when the narrative flows from the third person into free indirect discourse. When it does, Fred is thinking about emotionally labile material—how he has disappointed his mother, how he hates having to pretend to be in a bad mood when he would rather be his usual affable self. Free indirect discourse is triggered by Fred's emotional conflicts, by his sweet but muddleheaded and resentful thoughts about the people he cares about and who hold him fast in their web of love and power.

2. Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary.*

> Bovary during this time did not dare to stir from his house. He kept downstairs in the sitting-room by the side of the fireless chimney, his chin on his breast, his hands clasped, his eyes staring. "What a mishap!" he thought, "what a mishap!" Perhaps, after all, he had made some slip. He thought it over, but could hit upon nothing. *But the most famous surgeons also made mistakes; and that is what no one would ever believe! People, on the contrary, would laugh, jeer! It would spread as far as Forges, as Neufchatel, as Rouen, everywhere! Who could say if his colleagues would not write against him. Polemics would ensue; he would have to answer in the papers. Hippolyte might even prosecute him.* He saw himself dishonoured, ruined, lost; and his imagination, assailed by a world of hypotheses, tossed amongst them like an empty cask borne by the sea and floating upon the waves.
>
> Emma, opposite, watched him; she did not share his humiliation; she felt another—that of having supposed such a man was worth anything. As if twenty times already she had not sufficiently perceived his mediocrity. Charles was walking up and down the room; his boots creaked on the floor. "Sit down," she said; "you fidget me." He sat down again. *How was it that she—she, who was so intelligent—could have allowed herself to be deceived again?* and through what deplorable madness had she thus ruined her life by continual sacrifices? She recalled all her instincts of luxury, all the privations of her soul, the sordidness of marriage, of the household, her dream sinking into the mire like wounded swallows; all that she had longed for, all that she had denied herself, all that she might have had! And for what? for what? In the midst of the silence that hung over the village a heart-rending cry rose on the air. Bovary turned white to fainting. She knit her brows with a nervous gesture, then went on. And it was for him, for this creature, for this man, who understood nothing, who felt nothing! For he was there quite quiet, not even suspecting that the ridicule of his name would henceforth sully hers as well as his. She had made efforts to love him, and she had repented with tears for having yielded to another! (180)

Free indirect discourse is really Emma Bovary's signature style, but apparently it needs to take a detour through the husband she despises before it can make its way back to her. Perhaps it needs to run in the weaker, more vulnerable channel before it can run in the stronger channel. Once again emotionally labile material is the trigger—first the buzzing lure of guilty self-justification, then the deeper, more tragic blaze of marital resentment. And once again free indirect discourse is designed to handle double consciousness—not, in this case, Fred

Vincy's muddleheaded ambivalence, but the Bovaries' twinned minds, apparently riven far apart but actually locked in a terrible dance.

3. Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway.* Peter Walsh is thinking about his life.

> He was not old, or set, or dried in the least. As for caring what they said of him—the Dalloways, the Whitbreads, and their set, he cared not a straw—not a straw *(though it was true he would have, some time or other, to see whether Richard couldn't help him to some job).* Striding, staring, he glared at the statue of the Duke of Cambridge. He had been sent down from Oxford—true. He had been a Socialist, in some sense a failure—true. Still the future of civilisation lies, he thought, in the hands of young men like that; of young men such as he was, thirty years ago; with their love of abstract principles; getting books sent out to them all the way from London to a peak in the Himalayas; reading science; reading philosophy. The future lies in the hands of young men like that, he thought.

It may seem that I've cherry-picked this passage, one of the most aggressive moments of free indirect discourse in Woolf's novel. The novel opens by darting like a fish in and out of Clarissa Dalloway's thoughts and showing her euphoria in free indirect discourse: "What a lark! What a plunge!" Yet the euphoria doesn't last. Peter Walsh uses free indirect discourse as sandpaper to scrape against the world and its slights. He drops the angry tone only in the novel's last line. Seeing Clarissa at her party, we dip into his thoughts: "For there she was." But for most of the book, free indirect discourse belongs to that broken part of him that is still fighting a young man's Hobbesian war of all against all when his old friends have settled into their middle-aged lives. A reader has to know that Peter's beliefs about himself and other people are false. The reader not only has to be able to recognize that Peter is deceiving himself but also has to do so while holding several points of view in mind at once.

What to make of all of these passages? Each one shows a person putting other people in a bad light because his or her own self-regard is wounded. So he or she degrades the other person. Free indirect discourse shows the ropes and pulleys of all this volatile psychic material. The field becomes murky when people get next to other people they have some conflict with. A wife complains about her husband. A young man feels that people do not appreciate him. They tread on the harsh terrain of human-status dynamics.

Hearing other people indulge their petty complaints feels squalid. We can humor our friends, but sympathy tends to wane with strangers. Yet most social friction is small-world stuff. This was true for our ancestors in the cultures in which our minds evolved. We judge, we sum up, we put our version of events

around. So does everyone else. The sadness, the pathos, the little deceptive arts of self-regard—free indirect discourse threatens to confirm the worst doubts of the misanthropes. This is how Philip Roth conceives of free indirect discourse in a heavy-handed passage from *The Human Stain* (2000). An abusive Vietnam vet named Lester Farley rains bitter psychic blows on his ex-wife and the U.S. government in a rant that ends with the word *rage* repeated over and over again. Rage—the word, the feeling—are comically flaccid weapons in a quixotic quest. Lester Farley tilts at windmills in his mind, but his victory is Pyrrhic.

## Machiavellian Narratives

Ever since Plato, literary theorists have worried about why literary experience feels so rich and vivid. They have come up with many different ideas over the centuries. Plato thought that poets were sophists who could draw people away from real knowledge by tangling them up with mere images. More optimistically, Kant argued in the *Critique of Judgment* that art sponsors a unique harmony of the faculties, a cognitive experience we cannot get from any other source. Samuel Taylor Coleridge took Kant's ideas and made them into catnip for twentieth-century theorists, starting with the New Critics. Coleridge thinks we can isolate the richest, most complex moments of literariness with any work of art. He thus started a long argument about whether literary language (or experience) differs from ordinary language (or experience). I think Coleridge was right: moments that we think of as especially literary reflect an especially intense kind of reasoning. This kind of reasoning, which I will call Machiavellian, engages some of the things we care about most. In modern literature especially, Machiavellian reasoning reflects the sense that we are at once subject to the swirl and apart from it.

Let's start with flat and round characters. Putting them together is one of the major techniques by which writers ratchet up the pressure on our mind-reading abilities. E. M. Forster first described flat and round characters in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927). His definition has been disseminated through scores of literary handbooks and fiction writing guides: "In their purest form, they are constructed around a single idea or quality. . . . The really flat character can be expressed in one sentence such as "I never will desert Mr. Micawber" [from Dickens's David Copperfield]. There is Mrs. Micawber—she says she won't desert Mr. Micawber, she doesn't, and there she is . . . The test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way. If it never surprises, it is flat. If it does not convince, it is a flat pretended to be a round" (48). Flat characters are allegorical. All their features come from the idea they represent. They have no capacity to

learn from experience. Round characters are open and complex, much more like real human beings in their inconsistency.

Examples of this contrast can be found throughout fiction, old and new. Edmund Spenser's parade of the seven deadly sins in the first book of *The Faerie Queene* is a perfect allegory. Along comes Lustful Lechery clothed in flowing green garments and bearing in his hand a burning heart "Full of vaine follies, and new fanglenesse." Lechery also rides "Vpon a bearded Goat, whose rugged haire,/And whally eyes (the signe of gelosy,)/ Was like the person selfe, whom he did beare" (60). The goat is a witty twist: the very notion of being shot through with some trait, Spenser seems to say, is like the contact between a rider and his animal. Lechery shines outwards with such force that it extrudes its own reality, a goat with glassy eyes. If you are a flat character, you have no inner life. Instead you ride on an animal that shows off your main feature. This flat character has its own even flatter character as a sidekick. Round characters, meanwhile, are open and complex, much more like real human beings. (I'll admit this distinction is hardly fair to flat characters. I have known one or two real human beings who were so eaten by neurosis that they "never surprised.")

Here is a more realistic flat character, whom even her author holds in contempt. What could be worse than to try to inhabit the inner life of Miss Henrietta Stackpole, the lady newspaper interviewer of "decidedly clear-cut views," who weaves in and out of Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady?* James calls Henrietta Stackpole a "light ficelle," a thread that links all of the bits of his novel together. But just because she is a thread, and a rather sweet one at that, does not mean that she is exempt from some strong humiliations. James denies that either Henrietta Stackpole or Maria Gostrey, another "light ficelle" (from *The Ambassadors*), is a "true agent." They are mere vehicles beside the main character, a metaphor that he makes comically literal:

> Each of these persons is but wheels to the coach; neither belongs to the body of that vehicle, or is for a moment accommodated with a seat inside. There the subject alone is ensconced, in the form of its "hero and heroine," and of the privileged high officials, say, who ride with the king and queen. . . . They may run beside the coach "for all they are worth," they may cling to it till they are out of breath (as poor Miss Stackpole all so visibly does), but neither, all the while, so much as gets her foot on the step, neither ceases for a moment to tread the dusty road. (James 2003, 53)

Perhaps readers will object that, though she runs and clings, Henrietta Stackpole is not exactly a flat character. She cannot easily be sorted into good or bad. Since

motion is her trait, she is hardly static. She is not an allegory. Still, to be the wheel on a cart, a fishwife jeering the carriage of the royal family as they tumble towards their execution in Paris . . .

The mind-reading payoff comes when flat and round characters interact in what Alex Woloch, in his magisterial study of minor characters, calls "the character space of the novel" (2004 et passim). Flatness and roundness are complex attributes, ever shifting in relation to each other. As they shift, they pick out different textual patterns—a fact that is true both within a single text and true over different time frames as well. Consider the fate of Becky Sharp, the heroine of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848). Becky Sharp, Forster writes, "is round. She, too, is on the make, but she cannot be summed up in a single phrase, and we remember her so easily, because she waxes and wanes and has facets like a human being" (48). And yet Becky Sharp has flattened out over time. To Forster in 1927 she lives in the culture's imagination. Forster sees her many facets. People around him remind him of her. Her institutions are his institutions seventy-five years on. Yet for us at so many more removes, Becky Sharp has become shorthand, a fleeting piece of collective thought if we think of her at all. Indeed, Becky Sharp is in danger of becoming that flattest of all flat characters, the morally compromised Victorian Novel Heroine, or so she is known—if she is known at all—by writers looking for a northwest passage to the literary world.

Forster sees flat and round characters as locked in a folie à deux. He quotes a passage from a cranky letter by Mr. Norman Douglas to D. H. Lawrence, only to heap gentle scorn upon it. Mr. Douglas is angry that novelists sometimes reduce their characters to caricatures, an effect he calls "the novelist's touch." The novelist's touch fails "to realize the profundities and complexities of the ordinary human mind; it selects for literary purposes two or three facets of a man or woman, generally the most spectacular and therefore 'useful' ingredients of their character, and disregards all the others. . . . It falsifies life." Mr. Douglas is a smart fellow. He's really on to something deep. In reply, Forster observes that flatness and roundness entail each other: "a novel that is at all complex often requires flat people as well as round, and the outcome of their collision parallels life more accurately than Mr. Douglas implies" (Forster 1927, 48–49).

Flat characters may not be realistic, but they can be compelling. When flat characters interact with round characters, they tap into a rich vein of mind reading. In ancient and modern fiction, we can find some version of the following pattern: a flat character sets off a fit of reflection in a round or major character. The fit of reflection lights up the scene and the minds of the people in it. They engage in elaborate rituals of shared attention and eye contact. The scene be-

comes engorged with mindfulness, and the narrative seems to become aware of itself. Here is an example from the end of *The Aeneid,* one of the most troubling scenes in Western literature. The Trojan leader Aeneas and his Latin foe Turnus meet in a long-awaited battle. Turnus, who is proud and stiff-necked, challenges Aeneas to fight and leads the entire Latin army to bloody defeat at the hands of the Trojans. Turnus realizes his error and offers to fight Aeneas one on one. Turnus falls, and Aeneas pierces him in the thigh with his spear. As Aeneas moves to kill him, Turnus pleads for mercy. His plea causes Aeneas to pause briefly:

> Fierce under arms, Aeneas
> Looked to and fro, and towered, and stayed his hand
> Upon the sword-hilt. Moment by moment
> what Turnus said began to bring him round
> From indecision. Then to his glance appeared
> The accurst swordbelt surmounting Turnus' shoulder,
> Shining with its familiar studs—the strap
> Young Pallas wore when Turnus wounded him
> And left him dead upon the field; now Turnus
> Bore that enemy token on his shoulder—
> Enemy still. For when the sight came home to him,
> Aeneas raged at the relic of his anguish
> Worn by this man as trophy. Blazing up
> And terrible in his anger, he called out:
> "You in your plunder, torn from one of mine,
> Shall I be robbed of you? This wound will come
> From Pallas: Pallas makes this offering
> And from your criminal blood exacts his due."
> He sank his blade in fury in Turnus' chest.
> Then all the body slackened in death's chill,
> And with a groan for that indignity
> His spirit fled into the gloom below. (Putnam 1995, 402)

Readers have rightly worried about this ending for two thousand years.[2] Why does Virgil end his epic on such a morally ambiguous note? The poem seemed to be heading towards unity. The Trojans had beaten an indigenous Italian people, yet Juno won from Jupiter a promise that the Latins would not be killed off but would mix with their Trojan conquerors in a new noble race. Also, when Aeneas visited his father Anchises in the underworld, Anchises told him to show mercy

to his enemies. Nevertheless, the future founder of Rome acts brutally towards his defeated rival. In *The Iliad,* the wrathful Greek king Achilles, inflamed by memories of his friend Patroclus's death, brutally slew the Trojan prince Hector and dragged his body back and forth in front of the walls of Troy to torment Hector's parents, King Priam and Queen Hecuba. Although Aeneas was a comrade of Hector's, he behaves just as brutally towards Turnus as Achilles had towards Hector. The effect is even worse, since Achilles had invited Priam into his tent and allowed him to retrieve the body of his son. At the end of *The Aeneid,* there is no such kindness, only the shade of Turnus fleeing down to the underworld.

Still, Aeneas briefly hesitates before killing Turnus. His hesitation is the only brake on this brutal ending. Aeneas rolls his eyes (*volvens oculis*), stays his hand, and weighs Turnus's words, which begin to turn him from his great hesitation (*magis cunctantem*). Only when his eyes fall on the majestic belt of Pallas Athena that Turnus wears as a war trophy does Aeneas fly into a fury and kill him. Michael Putnam has done a long and careful reading of this moment. Drawing on a wealth of linguistic detail, he frames Aeneas's conflict as a philosophical one, as he struggles between commitment and detachment: "Aeneas first grapples with the inference of words. The hesitating hero, pondering the clementia that Turnus proposes, for an instant mulls over an abstract principle, which, if espoused in statesmanlike fashion, would have wide-ranging public repercussions. The belt of Pallas and what it represents, tangible reminder of Aeneas's devotion to his protégé, which at the same time sports figures bent on a particularly vivid example of revenge . . . drives the hero's fury to its highest pitch" (ibid., 162). Aeneas's "final deed," he concludes, "reminds us of the essential perversity of power even in the hands of those who could with some truth lay claim to have established the most orderly society that the world has yet known" (166).

Perverse comes from the Latin root *perversus,* "turned away from what is right." Even when Aeneas strikes the blow against Turnus he has almost turned away from his commitment to that blow. Commitment entails detachment and vice versa. Power is perverse. It requires a high degree of Machiavellian intelligence. The friction between Aeneas and Turnus leads to an increase in mindfulness all around. The cipher Turnus allows Aeneas to have a rich and rounded experience. Indeed, the friction creates what we think of as literariness—the special buzzing thickness, the strange harmony of the faculties that Kant described when he found himself in the presence of serious art.

Whether or not that feeling of literariness sticks to a genre (the novel), to a historical period (the nineteenth century), or to a mode (omniscient realism) are

further and interesting questions. But the engine itself—the sense of mindfulness that results from round and flat characters together—hums through a wide range of genres and periods. In modern literature, we can extend the idea of flatness and roundness to literary scenes and even to entire literary works. A round novel or work stages a dyadic or triadic or quadratic scene of reflection and counterreflection. The scene of reflection is often set inside a closed space or world. Wit is more important than force.

Highly Machiavellian narratives often feature somebody who sees farther than anybody else—the mastermind. The mastermind dominates other people through analytical reflection. These stories also feature the presence of one or more blocking figures—someone blind, dull, or unresponsive. They throw in several thematic cues that we are in the presence of high narrative reflexivity. These clues include chess, tennis, gambling and games of chance, business letters, labyrinths, excessively cruel people, proverbs, gossip, games of "evens and odds," eye contact ("we are great watchers of each other's eyes," writes Lovelace to Belford about Clarissa), and people who "turn a blind eye." This list is not especially internally consistent, but the way highly Machiavellian narratives treat these elements is—surprisingly so. Indeed, the consistency is puzzling. Texts that are especially rich in mind reading—from wildly different periods and national traditions—use the same figures over and over again. When one or several of these tropes of reflection finds its way into a narrative, that narrative becomes infinitely more Machiavellian.

The classic Machiavellian narrative is either a comedy of manners or a revenge tragedy, and sometimes both. Let me canvass a famous example, one that has led to a storied response. A classic Machiavellian narrative is Edgar Allan Poe's detective story "The Purloined Letter" (1845). So passionately does it signal that it is a high mind-reading text that it can serve as something of a template. "The Purloined Letter" is the third story in a trilogy featuring mastermind and reclusive genius C. Auguste Dupin, a forerunner to Sherlock Holmes. Dupin is a person especially high in mind reading—a fact signaled at the opening of the trilogy's first story, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), by a trick of apparent genius he plays on the story's narrator. The narrator (who is never named) lives with Dupin in Paris in what seems like a coffin. They shroud themselves in darkness during the day and venture out only at night. To the world, they appear to be "madmen." Dupin is cold and analytical, but he can also be a bit boastful, especially about his skills as a mind reader. During one of their night walks, he gloats "that most men, in respect to himself, wore windows in their bosoms," and, the narrator tell us, he "was wont to follow up such assertions by direct and very startling proofs of his

intimate knowledge of my own" (Muller and Richardson 1988, 5). In the next instant, he offers just such a proof. The two men are strolling along, each apparently lost in thought, until the narrator realizes that Dupin has been secretly tracking his thoughts the whole time:

> Being both, apparently, occupied with thought, neither of us had spoken a syllable for fifteen minutes at least. All at once Dupin broke forth with these words: "He is a very little fellow, that's true, and would do better for the Theatre des Varietes." "There can be no doubt of that," I replied unwittingly, and not at first observing (so much had I been absorbed in reflection) the extraordinary manner in which the speaker had chimed in with my meditations. In an instant afterward I recollected myself, and my astonishment was profound. "Dupin," said I, gravely, "this is beyond my comprehension. I do not hesitate to say that I am amazed, and can scarcely credit my senses. How was it possible you should know I was thinking of—?" (Ibid., 5–6)

Dupin plays a rather simple trick. He runs a chain of inferences in just the way his friend would have run them. What appears so mysterious to the narrator is really an exercise in pure rationality. Dupin's trick lies in knowing what inferences his friend will form. Once he figures out the formula, all he needs to do is plug in the first association and the whole chain runs as an algorithm. But Dupin's mastery has a second element, too. Dupin does not merely apply a formula to some inferences, he also runs that chain of inferences in a mode *decoupled* from his own mental processes and attached to the mental processes of somebody else. The psychological mastermind is often, it turns out, somebody who is able to do just that—think of any charlatan telephone psychic (or Henry James and Freud).

The mastermind is the most Machiavellian of characters. He—rarely she—typically occupies a privileged position in a round of reflection and counter-reflection. He reflects not only on the motivations of others but also on his own reflections. His gifts are thought to be beyond the realm of ordinary human capacities, but only by one or two degrees and only in ways we might be able to match. The interest we take in him can become obsessive, but so too can the urge to compete with his powers.

Dupin really comes into his own in "The Purloined Letter," whose epigraph (falsely claimed to be from Seneca) is a warning about too much Machiavellianism: "Nil sapitentiae odiosus acumine nimio"—"Nothing is more hateful to wisdom than too much cunning" (ibid., 24). One night Dupin and the narrator are sitting in their tiny dark room when their old friend, the prefect of the Paris po-

lice, arrives and confesses his despair about an unsolvable case: a royal lady, alone in her boudoir, was reading a distressing letter from one of her enemies when her important husband suddenly came in. In her confusion, she dropped the letter on the table. Soon thereafter the cunning Minister D—— entered the room and, "with his lynx eye," immediately "fathomed her secret." Casually taking out of his briefcase a letter somewhat like the lady's, he dropped it on the table, and after some talk, picked up the lady's letter and left the room. The lady saw what he had done but couldn't stop him. She was in the paradoxical position of the seer who is blind. Her husband, meanwhile, was in the position of the truly blind. The minister stood in the position of greatest insight. His insight was achieved because one person near him was blind; the other, a blind seer.

This triangle of blindness and insight has played a crucial role in how Poe's story has been interpreted. More complex literary works attract more interpretive attention. Highly Machiavellian texts—texts that put extra stress on our mind-reading capacities—have richer critical histories than texts that do not. This has certainly been true since literary criticism began to develop in the eighteenth century. "The Purloined Letter" is a case in point, even though the volcano took about one hundred and twenty years to blow. The volcano unleashed a tsunami of interpretation whose force is only now abating. In 1966, Jacques Lacan, the French psychoanalyst, published a now-notorious seminar on Poe's story. "The Purloined Letter" fascinated Lacan because he saw in it traces of his psychological system. His seminar then provoked a famous response from another French philosopher, Jacques Derrida. The details of their debate and the controversy it spawned are too complex to go over here, but suffice to say that at the center of it is the question of reflexivity, of who gets to count as a psychological mastermind (ibid.).

Back to the plot. Now the royal lady has engaged the prefect of the Paris police to retrieve her letter. The prefect sends his men to search every nook of the minister's apartment, even taking apart the furniture to look for secret holes. After several searches, the prefect admits that he is stumped. He confides his difficulties to Dupin. To his amazement, Dupin pulls out the letter and tells him that it had been hiding in plain sight the whole time. Then Dupin explains how he outwitted the minister. Fitted out in green eyeshades (the blinding agent that heightens his powers of vision by blinding everyone else to what he can see), Dupin soon lit upon the purloined letter—crumpled, kitted up to look like a love letter (with large loopy ladies' handwriting), turned inside out, and hung nonchalantly in a letter holder above the fireplace. Dupin returned the next day with a copy of the disguised letter, arranged some noise in the street to divert the min-

ister, and changed letters. Inside the copy he wrote "Un dessein si funeste,/S'il n'est digne d'Atrée, est digne de Thyeste" (A scheme so infamous, if it is not worthy of Atreus, is worthy of Thyestes). In Greek mythology, Atreus invites his brother Thyestes to a banquet at which he serves up Thyestes' son as the main dish. He thus revenges himself on Thyestes for running off with his wife, or as Barbara Johnson paraphrases it, "the avenger's plot may not be worthy of him, says Atreus, but his brother Thyestes deserved it" (ibid., 466). Dupin explains that he stole the letter to avenge himself for "an evil turn" the minister had done him once in Vienna, a turn that Dupin promised "good humoredly" to remember: "So, as I knew he would feel some curiosity in regard to the identity of the person who had outwitted him, I thought it a pity not to give him a clue." Dupin gets off scot-free: he gets his revenge and sticks the minister with the responsibility for it—as if Atreus had handed Thyestes a bill for the dinner he served him. Part of what makes "The Purloined Letter" so thrilling is that the position of the mastermind is so relentlessly unstable, so perverse.

Dupin's reasoning is truly perverse. In a pivotal scene, Dupin explains to the narrator how he found the purloined letter by outthinking both the minister and the prefect. The prefect, Dupin says, is rational in his own way, but his thinking is too linear. Dupin explains what it would be like to think in two or more dimensions by telling a story about a schoolboy who plays a game called "evens and odds," in which the one player has to guess how many marbles the other player is holding in his hand. The clever schoolboy figures out how to win the guessing game by reasoning what his "arrant simpleton" of an opponent will do on his next turn. When he plays against someone slightly cleverer, the schoolboy reasons correctly that his opponent will not simply choose odd if he had chosen even before, but will imagine that the schoolboy will know that he has chosen odd and will therefore stick to even. What the schoolboy does, says Dupin, "lies at the bottom of all the spurious profundity which has been attributed to La Bruyère, to Machiavelli, and to Campanella" (ibid., 16).

Dupin here presents a clinical picture of reasoning by mind reading. He combines what appears to be foresight—but he is really only anticipating the next thought his opponent will have—and imitation. So simple are his methods that they make writers like Machiavelli seem "spuriously profound." Not even Machiavelli could tell us how to play the game of social chess since, according to Dupin, all we really need to do is run an algorithm of sorts—call it the evens/odds algorithm. Indeed, the Machiavellians might even put us off this algorithm by morally freighting mind reading—suggesting, as this rather brazen little boy does not, that Machiavellian intelligence is something to be ashamed of.

This very algorithm, the evens and odds game, can be found throughout the fictional universe, though as far as I know, only Poe calls it by this name. When I say algorithm rather than theme or trope, I mean a simple piece of code that runs over and over again. Evens and odds is code that thickens up the psychological complexity. Consider, for example, Thomas Mann's magisterial novel *The Magic Mountain* (1924). Mann's achievement is to have created the longest sustained example of irony in all literature, the kind of irony that, according to Alexander Nehamas, "goes back to the very origins of the concept" and indeed "goes all the way down: it does not reveal the ironist's real state of mind, and it intimates that such a state may not exist at all. It makes a mystery of its author as well as of his characters, and it often turns its readers into fools" (Nehamas 1998, 30, 20). Mann's irony may turn us into fools, but we are staring fools. This is a novel whose meanings lurk almost pathologically between the lines. Scrutinize we can—and must—but to what end? The novel forces us to run on ball bearings.

In a pivotal scene, Mann throws in a game of evens and odds (though he does not call it that). Hans Castorp, "a very ordinary young man" from Hamburg, has come to the International Sanatorium Berghof to visit his cousin, who is dying of tuberculosis. Hans Castorp is a man in a plight, but he does not yet know it. Actually, he a man in several plights, but those he recognizes come to seem pale and flat compared to the zinging electricity of those he has yet to encounter. The plights range from the minor (how to fold a blanket the right way for the open-air rest cure) to the middling (how to think about the strange intellectual Herr Settembrini, who seems to be a version of Satan) to the major (how to accept the fact that he is not simply visiting his cousin in the sanatorium but is himself a patient there, that he too has tuberculosis). Love is one of Hans Castorp's plights. He slowly falls in love with a mysterious, somewhat vulgar married Russian woman named Clavdia Chauchat. Castorp becomes aware of his plight because he remembers a situation he faced earlier in his life, although he didn't recognize it at the time. When he was a schoolboy, he fell in love with another boy, Pribislav Hippe, whose pencil he borrowed one day—that was it. Pribislav had "Kirghiz eyes" (almond-shaped eyes, like the residents of the Turkmen plains) of the most stunning Asiatic blue. So does Frau Chauchat. The residents of the International Sanatorium Berghof, each assigned to a table, have little chance to interact. Hans Castorp sits with his cousin and several others. Frau Chauchat sits at the "good Russian table" (there is also a "bad Russian table"). He becomes obsessed with the way that Frau Chauchat comes into meals late and lets the heavy glass door slam behind her. This is careless, maybe also willful. Nobody else seems to notice, but Hans Castorp jumps and grows angry every time she does it—at least at first.

> At first he would whip his head around indignantly each time and with angry eyes follow the late-comer to her place at the Good Russian table, even scold her under his breath, rebuking her between his teeth with a cry of outraged protest. But he had given that up, and now he would bend his head farther over his plate, even bite his lips sometimes, or intentionally and elaborately turn to look the other way; because it seemed to him that he no longer had a right to be angry and was not really free to censure her, but that he was an accessory to the offense and answerable for it to the others—in short, he was ashamed. (Mann 2005, 132)

He was ashamed. Shame is a public emotion; it plays to an audience. In this case, the audience is not all "the others," as Hans Castorp thinks, but only one other, one of two persons in his circle who were also obsessed with Frau Chauchat, namely, a middle-aged German spinster named Fraulein Englehart, who may or may not have feelings for Hans Castorp herself. Fraulein Englehart has discovered Castorp's secret and seeks to play the game for her own ends. She supplies Castorp with the thing he most craves—information—a commodity in desperately short supply at the Berghof Sanatorium.

"The only thing that could possibly increase her standing in Hans Castorp's eyes was that she herself was from Konigsberg, a city not all that far from the Russian border, and so could manage a little broken Russian—very meager attributes indeed; all the same, Hans Castorp was prepared to regard them as some kind of extended personal connection to Frau Chauchat" (ibid., 132). So now the plight of Hans Castorp becomes entwined with the plight of Fraulein Englehart. Is this what he would have chosen? He has sort of accepted Madame Chauchat as one of his plights, although he still adopts a pose of mental superiority, thinking how soon he'll be back on the flatlands and working at the shipbuilding firm of Tunder and Wilms in Hamburg. But now he finds himself facing a new and rather insulting obstacle. Fraulein Englehart is his information pusher. She is also an intrusive creature with her own needs and interests. How can a young man accept that his fate intersects with somebody so irrelevant, charmless, and unpromising?

To Hans Castorp's credit, he takes on the challenge of Fraulein Englehart. Perhaps he doesn't have a choice: being in love makes us all into the most despicable charmers and users of other people. Thus he finds himself playing a strange game:

> That is how he worked it sometimes. With a cunning that was actually foreign to him, he pretended that Fraulein Engelhart's enthusiasm for Frau Chauchat was not in reality what he very well knew it to be, but that her enthusiasm was

some neutral, droll fact that he, Hans Castorp, as an uninvolved party standing off at a cool, amused distance, could use to tease the old maid. And since he was certain that his accomplice would accept his audacious distortion and go along with it, it was not a risky tactic at all.

"Good morning," he said. "Did you rest well? You did dream about lovely Minka, your Russian miss, didn't you? No, look at you blush at the mere mention of her. You're terribly infatuated, don't try to deny it."

And the teacher, who had indeed blushed and was now bent deep over her cup, whispered out of the left corner of her mouth, "Shame, shame, Herr Castorp. It isn't at all nice of you to embarrass me with your insinuations. Everyone has already noticed that it's her we're talking about and that you're saying things to make me blush."

What a strange game these two tablemates were playing. Both of them knew that their lies had double and triple twists—that Hans Castorp teased the teacher just so he could talk about Frau Chauchat, but that at the same time he took unwholesome delight in flirting with the old maid; and that for her part, she welcomed all this: first, because it allowed her to play the matchmaker, and second, because she probably had become smitten with Frau Chauchat, if only to please the young man, and finally, because she took some kind of wretched pleasure in being teased and made to blush. They both knew this about themselves and each other, and they also knew that each of them knew this about themselves and one another—and that it was all tangled and squalid. But although Hans Castorp was usually repelled by tangled and squalid affairs and even felt repelled in this instance as well, he continued to splash about in these murky waters, taking consolation in the certainty that he was here only on a visit and would soon be leaving. (Ibid., 135)

"They both knew this about themselves and each other, and they also knew that each of them knew this about themselves and one another—that it was all tangled and squalid." Hans Castorp "continued to splash about in these murky waters" even though he has exempted himself from his plight by "taking consolation in the certainty that he was here only a visit and would soon be leaving." What kind of reasoning is this? Of course it is Machiavellian, but Machiavellian tinged with irony because it shows Hans Castorp's blindness, not his insight. What Castorp takes to be his insightfulness is just another misstep.

Irony is one hallmark of modern literature. The perversity of irony is really not much different from the perversity of power. The conflict between Hans Castorp and Fraulein Englehart is much more inward than the conflict between

Aeneas and Turnus. Still, just as much is at stake emotionally, if not indeed more, because emotion is *all* that is at stake. The two conflicts may look as though they are opposites—one is about physical dominance, the other about emotional dominance—but that is simply because modernity has psychologized everything in sight.

A final turn. Machiavellian narratives drop their characters into the middle of the march and watch them try to wriggle out. The march is confusion. The confusion may be of the character's own making, enhanced by some distinctive cognitive trait. The cognitive trait need not be a deficit. The most interesting ones are those that exaggerate some element of the character's environment. And the elements of the character's environment that festoon a Machiavellian narrative are the bold icons of mind reading.

Consider the deep cognitive misadventure of Amasa Delano, captain of the *Bachelor's Delight* in Herman Melville's novella *Benito Cereno.* Amasa Delano, a New England trader from Duxbury, Massachusetts, is alerted to the strange listing presence of a ship adrift in a harbor on the coast of Chile. He would be uneasy at the sight "had he not been a person of a singularly undistrustful good nature, not liable, except on extraordinary and repeated excitement, and hardly then, to indulge in personal alarms, any way involving the imputation of malign evil in man" (Melville 2004, 2). What Delano sees and does not see can be drawn like a ring of fire around his base-level categories. Something about the world is revealed, but much is left obscure and misty. The light on the ship or perhaps the sun, wimpled in low-creeping vapour, "showed not unlike a Lima intriguante's one sinister eye peering across the Plaza from the Indian loop-hole of her dusk saya-y-manta" (3).

When Delano boards the *San Dominick*, he fails to see that the entire ship is in revolt. He is a racist. His conceptual categories commit him to a view of whites as persons and blacks as things. He draws these categories from the Bible, from a hazy knowledge of the wars between Protestant and Catholic Europe, and from a strange erotic obsession with animals. Delano's categories lead him to view Africans at first as objects, as tools to hand—except when he becomes especially fascinated with them, and then they work their way up into the category of animals. He conjures a strange mesmeric vision of shape-shifting and trickery out of the shadows in the netting:

> His attention had been drawn to a slumbering Negress, partly disclosed through the lace-work of some rigging, lying, with youthful limbs carelessly disposed, under the lee of the bulwarks, like a doe in the shade of a woodland

> rock. Sprawling at her lapped breasts was her wide-awake fawn, stark naked, its black little body half lifted from the deck, crosswise with its dam's; its hands, like two paws, clambering upon her; its mouth and nose ineffectually rooting to get at the mark; and meantime giving a vexatious half-grunt, blending with the composed snore of the Negress. (Ibid., 32)

Here is a terrible pastoral fantasy of slumbering maternity and the little cub, "ineffectually rooting" with its mouth "to get at the mark," its mother grossly, unconsciously snoring. The captain of the *Bachelor's Delight* finds the *San Dominick* a veritable Noah's Ark of fecundity.

Amasa Delano is like the worst kind of naïf, the traveling Yankee who brings his own categories with him wherever he goes. So predictable are his mental habits that he is easily fooled when Babo, the ringleader of the slave revolt, stages an elaborate masque. Although the slaves are firmly in control of the ship, Babo makes it look as though they are merely close props to a beloved and failing master. To Delano's eye, Don Benito Cereno, captain of the *San Dominick,* looks like a dissipated aristocrat in the throes of a nervous collapse. Babo looks like an unusually faithful servant, a mute "shepherd's dog." Delano's eye is conditioned to pick out contrasts between light and dark, between high and low, between master and slave. He reads those contrasts in light of pregiven hierarchies. Seeing the Spaniard and the African together, Delano puts everything into a neat box: "'Faithful fellow!' cried Captain Delano. 'Don Benito, I envy you such a friend; slave I cannot call him.' As master and man stood before him, the black upholding the white, Captain Delano could not but bethink him of the beauty of that relationship which could present such a spectacle of fidelity on the one hand and confidence on the other. The scene was heightened by the contrast in dress, denoting their relative positions" (13). Delano only has to put a little pressure on his preselected categories to make sense of the scene in front of him. He finds himself confused only by the intensity of the Spanish captain's nervousness and of Babo's unwavering devotion. So little is Amasa Delano able to imagine a scene in which the black man is master over the white that he imputes all weirdness to the Spaniard's intense reserve, a reserve that makes him seem like an idiot holding "slumbering dominion" over his ship.

Amasa Delano's habitual categories are threatened several times before they explode. Each threat builds to a miniclimax in the tale. The stress exposes how attached Delano is to his mental tracks. The negress passage is one such. It slides into Delano's consciousness right around the same time that he is asked to cut a Gordian knot by a weather-beaten old sailor. Feeling that something is wrong,

Delano also starts to reflect on how innocent he is, how unlikely to hurt anybody. The track of his thoughts is jaunty:

> "What, I, Amasa Delano—Jack of the Beach, as they called me when a lad- I, Amasa; the same that, duck-satchel in hand, used to paddle along the waterside to the schoolhouse made from the old hulk; little Jack of the Beach, that used to go berrying with cousin Nat and the rest; I to be murdered here at the ends of the earth, on board a haunted pirate-ship by a horrible Spaniard?—Too nonsensical to think of! Who would murder Amasa Delano? His conscience is clean. There is some one above. Fie, fie, Jack of the Beach! You are a child indeed; a child of the second childhood, old boy; you are beginning to dote and drool, I'm afraid." (Ibid., 36)

Delano thinks of himself as a boy duckling, a toy animal on its way to root around in the old hulk for knowledge and food. He is like the African boy at his mother's breast. Yet what feels animistic and innocent in him seems animalistic and instinctual in the Africans.

What Delano doesn't realize is that he is a character in someone else's drama. Babo stages the whole tableau for his benefit. For his starring role in the revolt, Babo is later killed by the Spaniards. "Some months after, dragged to the gibbet at the tail of a mule, the black met his voiceless end. The body was burned to ashes; but for many days, the head, that hive of subtlety, fixed on a pole in the Plaza, met unabashed, the gaze of the whites (and his head is stuck on a pike in the middle of the town square)" (ibid., 80). Babo is an impresario mastermind. His mind is a hive of subtlety. Is Babo an author-figure? The genius of the place or the genius of the story? If so, he is suppressed, first by his own theatrical will and then by the brutal Spaniards. In fact, his very suppression may be what makes this a Machiavellian narrative.

## Attention

Machiavellian narratives have many similar features. Like identical twins raised in different families, they sometimes show up wearing the same clothes and married to people with the same first name. They turn to the same themes, figures, and metaphors. But what they show is almost always less important than what they don't show. Machiavellian narratives suppress obvious tropes of reflection. Often, the only way to recognize these mind-reading tropes is by the traces they leave when they are disavowed. One by one, highly reflexive elements are condemned as being too obvious. The figures of the deep game are sloughed off in

favor of a deeper game, the deep truth of which is imageless. Many highly Machiavellian narratives—Austen's *Emma,* Eliot's *Middlemarch,* Nabokov's *Lolita*—center on games or puzzles that point the way to deeper registers of reflection and that are eventually absorbed into the story. In fact, you might say that the presence of one or more tropes of reflection inaugurates the narrative's entry into the Machiavellian order.

Let me give you an example. Henry James specializes in fiction that is almost dizzyingly reflective. His masterful little novella *What Maisie Knew* (1897) puts several mind-reading tropes in play within what James calls "a wild game of going round." Maisie is the issue of a marriage between two people—the bearded, gleaming-toothed Beale Farange and his tall athletic billiard-playing wife, Ida—who are absolutely selfish. Or they would be absolutely selfish were it not for the existence of the other person, who sets for each of them a limit to (and also a reason for) their selfishness. In his preface, James writes that the story was inspired by a tale of divorce and remarriage that he once heard: "some luckless child" was "to find itself practically disowned, rebounding from racquet to racquet like a tennis-ball or a shuttlecock." All because of a judgment against its parents (the gender-effacing pronoun foreshadows a key moment early on in the novella, when Maisie becomes so stupid that she morphs into a thing). James's tale begins when, after protracted litigation, Beale scores a victory over his wife by getting full custody of Maisie. The victory, however, is short-lived. Part of the judgment goes against him, and he is forced to give back his wife's fortune of £2,500. Unable to do so, Beale instead returns half of his daughter "in a judgment that would have made Solomon proud." Typically money is divisible, whereas a child is not. Here the child is split in two while the money remains whole.

This breakage releases a fantastic diversion of energies, what James calls a "wild game of going round." The rules of the game, although never announced, are rather simple. Each player tries to grab as many resources as possible and take them off the table. But each player only ever gets half. Nonetheless they scheme, push, worry, and fret about what the others are getting. Beale and Ida, especially, lose and lose and lose in this mental way, and in losing, win. Consider:

> This was a society in which for the most part people were occupied only with chatter, but the disunited couple had at last grounds for expecting a time of high activity. They girded their loins, they felt as if the quarrel had only begun. They felt indeed more married than ever, inasmuch as what marriage had mainly suggested to them was the unbroken opportunity to quarrel. There had been "sides" before, and there were sides as much as ever; for the sider too the

> prospect opened out, taking the pleasant form of a superabundance of matter for desultory conversation. The many friends of the Faranges drew together to differ about them; contradiction grew young again over teacups and cigars. Everybody was always assuring everybody of something very shocking, and nobody would have been jolly if nobody had been outrageous. (James 1985, 37)

"A superabundance of matter for desultory conversation": what better way to describe the flow of mental activity over the black rocks of mortal conflict. Fighting gives both the Faranges, and their stable of hangers-ons, a motive to keep their chips down in the "wild game of going round." Each of the selfish parents is checked by the absolute selfishness of the other one. But the existence of the other keeps them going round. Each one is roughly in the position of the runner in Zeno's paradox, who can never reach his goal because he can only ever get halfway to any particular point along the way.

All of which brings us to Maisie Farange. Maisie is alternately a "light vessel of consciousness, swaying in a draught" and the "little feathered shuttlecock" that her parents "fiercely keep flying between them." She is the game piece, and as such, her role seems to be to lose every round, rather than, like each of her parents, to win exactly half the time. The child becomes a pawn, a tool, an instrument. Here is her dilemma:

> They [her parents] had wanted her not for any good they could do her, but for the harm they could, with her unconscious aid, do each other. She should serve their anger and seal their revenge, for husband and wife had been alike crippled by the heavy hand of justice, which in the last resort met on neither side their indignant claim to get, as they called it, everything. If each was only to get half this seemed to concede that neither was so base as the other pretended, or, to put it differently, offered them both as bad indeed, since they were only as good as each other. The mother had wished to prevent the father from, as she said, "so much as looking" at the child; the father's plea was that the mother's lightest touch was "simply contamination." These were the opposed principles in which Maisie was to be educated—she was to fit them together as she might. (Ibid., 37)

And fit them together she does. She pioneers a strategy that I have come to think is absolutely central to the literary experience of mind reading—namely, mind blindness. Mind blindness, which I explore in great detail in later chapters, is a way of acknowledging the social order by opting out of it. In brief, Maisie refuses the "wild game of going round" by turning herself mentally into an object of the

most sublime stupidity: "either from extreme cunning or from extreme stupidity, she appeared not to take things in" (ibid., 43). Becoming stupid is Maisie's revenge, her turn of the screw. She opts out of *la ronde* simply because she refuses to be a tool in someone else's hands. Her stance turns out to be rather Kantian: unable to assert her own agency, Maisie finds a way to become an end in herself. Here is the extraordinary passage in which she changes:

> The theory of her stupidity, eventually embraced by her parents, corresponded with a great date in her small still life: the complete vision, private but final, of the strange office she filled. It was literally a moral revolution and accomplished in the depths of her nature. The stiff dolls on the dusky shelves began to move their arms and legs; old forms and phrases began to have a sense that frightened her. She had a new feeling, the feeling of danger; on which a new remedy rose to meet it, the idea of an inner self or, in other words, of concealment. She puzzled out with imperfect signs, but with a prodigious spirit, that she had been a centre of hatred and a messenger of insult, and that everything was bad because she had been employed to make it so. Her parted lips locked themselves with the determination to be employed no longer. She would forget everything, she would repeat nothing, and when, as a tribute to the successful application of her system, she began to be called a little idiot, she tasted a pleasure new and keen. When therefore, as she grew older, her parents in turn announced before her that she had grown shockingly dull, it was not from any real contraction of her little stream of life. She spoiled their fun, but she practically added to her own. She saw more and more; she saw too much. (43)

Maisie makes herself into a thing precisely in order to preserve her sense of personhood—a remarkable feat. In some sense, she comes to inhabit the image that James uses to describe her in the beginning—the tennis ball or shuttlecock. The image itself, the tennis ball, gets absorbed in the narrative, by which I mean deepened, literalized, transformed. Such images of high reflexiveness are traces of mind reading thrown off to the side as the psychological novel takes its course.

Back to my general claim: the typical Machiavellian narrative suppresses its most overt symbols of reflection, casting them off as the story moves along. Why does it do so? Our mind-reading capacity is a highly evolved and complex cognitive system for understanding the beliefs, intentions, and desires of other people. Innovations in narrative technique are driven by the need to ratchet up pressure on our mind-reading capacities—and as a result, writers develop extremely effective techniques for stimulating them. But to what end? Is having our mind-reading capacities stimulated inherently pleasurable? Is that an end in itself? Is

the pleasure that we get from literary stimulation like, for example, taking drugs? Drugs can easily hijack all kinds of pleasure receptors and brain functions. They thus take advantage of biological processes that, if they were being stimulated by other sources, would provide adaptive advantages. Drugs provide no adaptive advantages, but they mimic processes that do. Is literary mind reading like this?

No. The very fact that overt mind-reading processes are often subordinated is key. Writers use techniques that stimulate these capacities in order to slake two very important psychological cravings, cravings that form part of our Mammalian social inheritance. These cravings are, I believe, highly socially functional, and they speak to the adaptive function of literary art. The first is a craving for specific kinds of information; the second, a craving to be paid back for paying attention. In fact, I want to nominate this last sentence as the thesis of my book, which will take a little while to unfold. Let me begin by showing what narrative suppression looks like.

An example from Lisa Zunshine starts the conversation. Many critics have noticed that eighteenth-century British novelists experimented with intersubjectivity and that some novelists, especially Richardson and Austen, invented techniques to extend the reach of the written word around "a web of partially interpenetrating consciousnesses," in which "the self perceives the gestures, either of body or word, of another consciousness, and it continues when the self can perceive in those gestures an awareness of his or her own gestures" (Butte 2004, 28). How could a novelist capture these gauzy filaments in the fragile casing of narrative? Rather simply, according to Zunshine, by inventing scenes in which the reader is suddenly forced to pay attention to four levels of intentionality. Her example is the famous climax of Jane Austen's *Persuasion,* when Anne Elliot, watching from a window in Bath, sees Captain Frederick Wentworth unexpectedly encountering her cold and haughty sister, Elizabeth, in a bakery across the way. For Anne, the scene is momentous, offering her the first explicit clue that Captain Wentworth might still be in love with her: "It did not surprise, but it grieved Anne to observe that Elizabeth would not know him. She saw that he saw Elizabeth, that Elizabeth saw him, that there was complete internal recognition on each side; she was convinced that he was ready to be acknowledged as an acquaintance, expecting it, and she had the pain of seeing her sister turn away with unalterable coldness" (Austen 2003, 166).

Scenes like this one can be found throughout Austen's fiction. Austen uses them to stage—and the word is intentional—key moments of insightfulness. Critics have praised these scenes for introducing "deep intersubjectivity" into "storytelling in modern culture" (Butte 2004, 4). But Zunshine takes the analysis

a step further, figuring out how to map the crucial recognition scene according to levels of embedment:

> Anne *realizes* that Wentworth *understands* that Elizabeth *pretends not to recognize* that he *wants* to be *acknowledged* as an acquaintance. This is the fourth level of embedment, reaching, perhaps even further: up to the fifth level. I suspect that moments like this, when we are faced with five levels of mental embedment, are not too frequent in Austen, but that on the whole she does operate on at least the third level of embedment, with frequent forays into the fourth. Similarly, the moments in Defoe in which we have three levels of subjective embedment . . . are much less frequent than the scenes embedding two levels. (Zunshine 2007, 279–80)

What Zunshine says about the differences between Austen and Defoe is true. Austen is a writer of higher-order mind-reading texts, whereas Defoe almost pathologically avoids mind reading (I explore the distinction at length in Chapter 5). But Zunshine goes a step further, inventing a strategy that closely resembles one of the most famous literary critical principles of all time—the heresy (or impossibility) of paraphrase. She suggests that it is almost impossible to "downgrade" these four levels of embedded recursion to a more comfortable two levels and still "convey the meaning of the scene."

> For example, were we to do it with the encounter in the Molland's bakery shop. it would go something like this, "Anne notices the exchange of looks between Wentworth and Elizabeth." This sounds not just simplified but plainly wrong because the first interpretation of this sentence that comes to mind is that Wentworth and Elizabeth might be interested in each other. What happens if we try conveying the gist of the scene by downgrading it not to the second but to the third level of embedment? We can say, "Anne notices the exchange of looks between Wentworth and Elizabeth and realizes that Elizabeth still dislikes Wentworth," or, "Anne notices the exchange of looks between Wentworth and Elizabeth and realizes that Wentworth is trying to be friendly with Elizabeth." Both of these still misconstrue the meaning of the passage! To get finally to the correct meaning we would have to say, "Anne notices the exchange of looks between Wentworth and Elizabeth and realizes that even though Wentworth is trying to be friendly with Elizabeth, she still dislikes him, and he is now becoming aware of her continuous dislike." We are back to our fourth-to-fifth level embedment, even if the phrasing does not sound like Austen and does not convey other important nuances of the episode. (Ibid., 286)

Zunshine is absolutely right. Paraphrase is just as impossible here as it would be in the case of some bit of poetic syntax, for instance, "a slumber did my spirit seal." And yet Zunshine's analysis, as useful as it is, misses what I think is the key point about this scene: Austen very much wants us to have a second-level embedded response to the action. Austen wants us to think, "Anne Elliot now recognizes that Wentworth still has feelings for her." Beneath the hood, the engine may be humming along and sorting out all these levels of embedded mind reading, but the machine itself simply delivers a judgment. Here is the moment we have been waiting for. He wants to be acknowledged. He wants the family's attention. Why does he want that? Reader, he loves her!

Austen's great insight is that she could write scenes with four or five levels of recursive mind reading that nonetheless allow us to have a second-level embedded response by running a quick and frugal heuristic. She has set us up to want such a response by giving us access to Anne Elliot's feelings but not to Wentworth's. So all we need to know is what's in his mind. And this insight we suddenly get, indirectly, by watching him interact with a minor but comically hostile character. The fact that he lingers, that he submits his pride to be socially mortified by Elizabeth Elliot, that he tries to keep their talk going—these are all powerful clues, but perhaps the main one is how long they talk in the first place. Austen practices tact, using embedded recursive mind reading as a way of making her point indirectly. No, you can't really translate all of these many levels of embedded psychology into simpler ones by thinking about how to do it, but you can translate it rather simply, in the way you do with metaphor, just by brute feel.

Zunshine's larger point is important. "Austen learned to construct her deeply-intersubjective passages in such a way that the deep intersubjectivity is organic to their meaning: eliminate one or two levels of mental embedment and you lose the meaning. But once Austen has this particular representational tool in her writing toolbox, she could use it on some occasions and not on others, just like she would any other rhetorical strategy" (ibid., 9). Zunshine thinks that once Austen had figured all this out, she could run the algorithm over and over again. I agree. I also think that her algorithm is the means to an end, one that requires much less reasoning. Mind reading is almost never an end in itself, but rather a means to other ends. What ends might those be? Various, of course. In *Persuasion,* mind reading resolves what by this point in the story has become an unbearable tension—namely, the question of what is in Frederick Wentworth's heart.

But the real question is somewhat larger. *Persuasion,* unlike *Emma,* is not really a novel of information. To be sure, Austen sows a few seeds of doubt about whether Mr. Eliot will turn out to be hero or villain, but she has used this plot de-

vice so many times in her career that she now almost can't seem to muster the energy for it. Mrs. Smith's gothic revelations about Mr. Eliot's evil past, though lurid, are hardly necessary to persuade Anne that she doesn't love him. *Persuasion* contains no puzzles, no mysteries, no riddles, no clues, no charades, no blanks to be filled in. There are only characters, and they are more or less suited to each other, as they more or less know from the beginning. In fact, the answer to the question of whom Wentworth loves turns out to be the same as the answer to the question of who he pays attention to. For attention in this novel is both a good and a scarce resource. All the characters in the novel compete for it, and there just isn't enough of it to go around.

In *Persuasion,* the word *attention* or some variant of it—*attend, attentive, inattention,* and so on—appear over two hundred times as compared to just over thirty for *persuade* or *persuasion.* Each character has his or her strategy for milking attention from the others and for taking his or her place on the stage like singers in an opera seria Mary, Anne's hypochondriacal sister, has perfected the technique of intruding her concerns into the mental worlds of those around her, like a perfectly aimed fishing line breaking the smooth surface of thought. Attention so totally engrosses her that she slaps Anne in the face with her need for it. Having been "much gratified" by Wentworth's early attention, she wheels on her sister: "Captain Wentworth is not very gallant by you, Anne, though he was so attentive to me. Henrietta asked him what he thought of you, when they went away, and he said, 'You were so altered he should not have known you again.'" (Austen 2003, 57). Anne, whom the narrator introduces at the end of a long dependent clause as "nobody," is everybody's favorite ear, the one who is always paying attention and is never paid back (7). And so the scene in Molland's Bakery shop shows the mutual focusing of attention. Attention is the key to the scene: Elizabeth is cold, she withdraws her attention from Wentworth, and Wentworth desires to secure it—all of this Anne sees. She begins to believe, as we do, that Wentworth's wandering attention has come back to her.

This is an old Austenian theme. Alex Woloch describes attention as the "coin" of *Pride and Prejudice,* and he has in mind a complicated narrative action of dispersal, focus, and collecting whereby Elizabeth Bennet becomes the particular object first of Wickham's and then of Darcy's attention (Woloch 2004, 114). Woloch's focus is structuralist rather than cognitive, but I think that his analyses of Austen's narrative sorting mechanisms can easily be mapped onto mind reading analyses.[3] Austen's narrative draws different perspectives to itself like a magnet and then disperses them again (to use Woloch's term), but they are nonethe-

less still perspectives, and someone's perspectives at that. Human agency and intentionality are never far from the surface.

Let me end by saying why I think the focus on attention is so crucial to literary narratives. It has to do with the adaptive function of art and even of something as historically specific as literary art. Attention is not just a good and a constrained resource for Austen's characters, but for all of us, writes Brian Boyd:

> Because we are such a highly social species we crave the attention of others. Human infants are distressed at adults who do not respond to them; infants and children across cultures punish others by withdrawing attention. At any age we like to command attention in ways we choose, for the ability to compete successfully for attention is closely correlated with status, which raises rates of survival and reproduction. And we can recognize something artistic in such forms of competitive animal attention-getting as the dances of lekking birds, the songs of songbirds or whales, or the extravagant architecture of bowerbirds. Not only do we like to command attention, we also enjoy simply sharing it with others, because this cements our place in a social group whose support we need. . . . Curiosity directed at what we can do that gives us cognitive pleasure, whether by engaging our own attention or commanding or sharing that of others, has deep roots in the evolution of our intelligence and sociality. But in humans the prodigious development of the frontal lobes, associated with meta-representation, and with the conditional and inhibitory, allow us to monitor our own reactions, to select one choice and reject another to produce this or that effect, in a way that ratchets the inclination towards art, toward doing or making something for the mind to attend to and enjoy, to a new level. (Boyd 2001, 198)

## The Drama of Differential Access to Social Information

Attention is a social and biological good, but the Machiavellian drama is almost always a fight for something just as precious: secret knowledge. The best thing about secret knowledge is waiting for it, but that means psychological agita. Here's where fiction comes in. Fictions rich in mind reading stage a drama of differential access to social information (and all the attendant worry) not just for the readers of those novels but also for the characters inside of them.

A startling example is *The Mother's Recompense* (1925), one of Edith Wharton's late masterpieces. Kate Clephane is a woman in her mid forties living in exile in a Riviera hotel surrounded by expats. She is in love with a young man who has

left her—Chris Fenno, a handsome but feckless artist from Baltimore. Kate Clephane yearns for the months they were lovers in the early part of the war. They were indifferent to the war in the way lovers are until suddenly Chris decided to enlist. After the war, Kate receives a telegram and hopes it is from him. Instead, it comes from her grown daughter, Anne, in New York, asking her to come home. Kate's mother-in-law, the forbidding old Mrs. Clephane, has just died. She was the barrier to reuniting with the girl Kate had given birth to twenty years earlier, when she left a loveless marriage to John Clephane (now also dead) by running away in the night with Hylton Davies.

She never thinks of Hylton Davies now: "He had become to her with his flourish and his yachting-clothes, and the big shining yacht, and the cocoa-palms and general setting of cool drink and tropical luxury, as unreal as somebody in a novel, the highly colored hero (or villain) on the 'jacket.'" Hylton Davies has become a flat character when she remembers him "in the deep sense of remembering," but so too has her younger self: "He had vanished into a sort of remote pictorial perspective, where a woman of her name figured with him, in muslin dresses and white sunshades, herself as unreal as a lady on a 'jacket'" (Wharton 1986, 14) Other people from her days in New York have become unreal, too: her former husband, whom she remembers as speaking only in proverbs; his mother, with her sense of propriety and thick black eyebrows; the endless Tressleton and Drover cousins, each one more stolid than the last.

The most vivid to her is Anne, whom she remembers as a child of three standing in front of the fireplace trying to feed the sparks because she thinks they are birds. Now Kate finds herself recalled to face her daughter. Their reunion is warm, and for a while they live happily together—until Kate begins to suspect that Anne has a lover. The lover is Chris Fenno, whom Anne met while serving as a nurse in an army hospital in Long Island. Chris Fenno, now a war hero, is as vain and breezy as ever. The novel's ending is sad. Stricken and shocked, Kate tries hard to make Chris Fenno abandon her daughter. Anne, who knows nothing of Chris and Kate's past, is heartbroken but determined to hold onto him (staring out woodenly under those black Clephane brows). The Tressletons and Drovers think that Kate disapproves of Chris because she has become a prude. The irony is that in the years since Kate disgraced herself, the Tressletons and Drovers now have their own divorces and scandals. They suspect Kate of being hidebound. Light never dawns fully, but it comes in glimmers. At the nadir of their relationship, Anne accuses Kate not of hating Chris Fenno but of being in love with him—a quick reversing thrust at the center of a novel structured by crossings of all kinds. But Anne never really lets herself know about her mother and Chris.

Kate forces herself to attend their wedding, and the newlyweds fade off into the distance while Kate goes back to the Riviera, her old companions only mildly curious about her absence. The only difference now is that she is rich.

*The Mother's Recompense* is a revenger's tragedy in which the revenger (Anne) never realizes that she has taken revenge. The only person with full access to the information is Chris Fenno, the mastermind, and Kate becomes increasingly absorbed in the question of what he knows. Chris Fenno is a coy and flighty artist, so that question remains unresolved. At the apex of their psychic battle, Kate has a sudden insight into her adversary: "Now she understood that she had guessed in him from the outset this genius for reaching, at the first thrust, to the central point of his antagonist's misery." Her insight is hedged around, as is typical for a Machiavellian narrative, with labyrinth imagery: "His hand fell from her shoulder, and he drew back a step. 'A way out—now? But there isn't any'" (ibid., 178); "for Anne's sake she must try to make the most of it, to grope her own way and the girl's through this ghastly labyrinth without imperiling whatever affection Anne still felt for her" (155). It is shot through, also, with doubts about who knows what, about what is in everyone's mind. The most intense of these doubts is the daughter's worry about being known to her mother and the corresponding feeling of blindness that triggers in Kate: "You don't know me either, mother! . . . After all, we're only strangers to each other." "The two stood facing each other for a moment; then Mrs. Clephane put her hand out blindly" (153). Kate Clephane's groping hand is an imperfect instrument of knowledge fighting for insight in the labyrinth.

Central to the all this is the blocking figure—the person who becomes an obstacle. One by one, the Clephanes (the name suggests transparency) fit into that crucial structural position in the narrative. Old Mrs. Clephane, with her black and forbidding eyebrows and John Clephane, her son (Kate's husband), are the two obvious "blinds." John Clephane makes sense of the world by spouting proverbs. Kate learns, for example, that John could never let her see her daughter after she left because, as a friend explains, "John was—always the slave of anything he'd once said. Once he'd found a phrase for a thing, the phrase ruled him. He never could be got beyond that first vision of you . . . you and Davies." "Never—?" "No. All the years after made no difference to him. He wouldn't listen. 'Burnt child dreads the fire' was all he would say" (ibid., 41–42).

A good rule of thumb in Machiavellian narratives is that proverbs come out of the mouths of flat and minor characters. Such figures use proverbs to reduce the flux of experience to what they can manage. The Machiavellian narrative relentlessly condemns them for it, even though their proverbs usually get to the heart

of the matter. The Machiavellian narrative hates proverbs, maybe because they are a competing source of narrative wisdom, shallower and less expensive than the Machiavellian narrative's own deep musings. John Clephane orders his world through proverbs, and Kate always finds herself running up against them. Here is a scene, masterfully drawn, of Kate's first family dinner after she returns:

> And now the dinner was progressing, John Clephane's champagne bubbling in their glasses (it seemed oddest of all to be drinking her husband's Veuve Clicquot), Lilla steadily smoking, both elbows on the table, and Nollie Tresselton leading an exchange of chaff between the younger cousins, with the object, as Kate Clephane guessed, of giving her, the newcomer, time to take breath and get her bearings. It was wonderful, sitting there, to recall the old "family dinners," when Enid's small censorious smile (Enid, then in her twenties!) seemed as inaccessible to pity as the forbidding line of old Mrs. Clephane's lips; when ever Joe Tresselton's mother (that lazy fat Alethea Tresselton) had taken her cue from the others, and echoed their severities with a mouth made for kissing and forgiving; and John Clephane, at the foot of the table, proud of his wine, proud of his cook, still half-proud of his wife, was visibly to himself, as he looked about on his healthy handsome relatives: "After all, blood is thicker than water." (Ibid., 52)

At the end of the scene, the proverb stands as a dull exclamation point, cutting off the game of going round. The proverb is authoritative, final, incurious, standing in the same position in relation to the bubble of social energy as John and his mother do towards Kate herself. All you need to know is that you are married to us, they seem to say to her. No need to know or think or wonder. John Clephane, we learn, uses his proverbs as a defense against new knowledge coming in—just the opposite, one might think, of what a proverb should do.

These five turns are really brief-brush examples of themes and techniques that writers use to trigger mind reading in their texts. Each of these turns—glances and eye contact, focalization through narrative technique (free indirect discourse), Machiavellianism, the importance of attention, and differential access to social information—lies at the heart of all of the subsequent readings. The readings themselves are varied, ranging from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. While they mostly center on the history of the novel and on the way narrative develops across the modern period generally, I do at points focus on satire and on the odd poem. Each reading attempts to place mind reading in some larger context, whether philosophical, cultural, or authorial.

# *The Fantasy of Exposure and Narrative Development in Eighteenth-Century Britain*

Censure is the tax a man pays to the public for being eminent.
—*Jonathan Swift, Thoughts on Various Subjects*

The conflict between self and society has been one of the great themes of liberal and bourgeois writers from John Stuart Mill to Freud to John Rawls. (A liberal is a writer who hopes to find a way to resolve this conflict.) It has also been the focus of visionary antiliberal writers like Nietzsche, who, drawing on a countervailing Homeric tradition, contemn the homogenizing effects of the modern system. Many theorists of the social polity say that people live in a state of self-division in which antisocial impulses must be suppressed or turned inward. This requirement is felt as norm, system, ideology, fetter, or obligation; it can (perhaps) also slide into the unconscious and return as neurotic symptom.

A version of this conflict, which was set in motion through a convergence between early capitalism and early journalism, still reverberates in our political and media cultures. So familiar is it that it has taken on an exaggerated, almost cartoonish cast. The postulate is that the practice of self-interest, especially when it involves status or sex, tears at the fabric of public virtue. Since saints are always meek and childless, self-interest is something that people pursue in secret. Yet, pursue it they must. The first requirement of the liberal polity is that people maintain a façade of disinterestedness. The social code makes us all hypocrites. This requirement is psychologically (and, increasingly, legally) burdensome: it forces people into a posture of impossible consistency.

When a reporter for the *New York Times* asked Al Gore during the notorious 2000 presidential campaign about his habit of exaggerating, Gore said that the problem lay not with him but with the press. "Part of it is the modern—the hair

trigger on the hypocrisy pop gun these days and the politics of biography interacting with that hair trigger" (Oct. 15, 2000). Gore was right to use the word *modern*. He was also right that the "politics of biography" interact especially well with "the hair trigger on the hypocrisy pop gun." But most of all Gore was astute to notice that he stands accused of hypocrisy, even though hypocrisy would seem to be a much more sinister and habitual vice than stretching the truth. Gore's response exhibits a greater degree of self-knowledge than he is usually credited with having. He is a politician who by all accounts has more difficulty than most in smoothing over the disjunction between his private and public personae. He is also less comfortable than other politicians with the "modern" requirement that he create for the public eye a consistent self-image that cannot be pierced or exposed. He is not simply venal or corrupt. To the extent that self-interest emerges from behind his public veil of piety, it is not even especially clear where his interests lie.

This chapter explores the conflict in one of its earliest modern forms. The idea that there is a public eye trained to uncover a secret cache of self-interest and to enforce public norms became an especially powerful metaphor in early eighteenth-century Britain. Only a few decades separate the writers Daniel Defoe and Samuel Richardson, but Richardson's character Clarissa feels invaded (and unjustly controlled) by "the eye of the world," whereas Defoe's characters fear "the eye of God." The metaphor of a worldly monitor may have arisen during a contentious growth in party politics. The rise of the two-party system in the late seventeenth century institutionalized conflicts of interest. The way that famously charismatic politicians dominated the system in the eighteenth century made conflicts of interest seem a matter of the personalities who rode them to their advantage. Add to these factors the decline of a system of court patronage and the rise of the professional politician, and a context emerges in which a politician's personal failings came to stand for all the dangers of a new and somewhat unfamiliar system.

Party politics, however, was only one engine among others of the spread of a powerful cluster of tropes. Eighteenth-century Britons invented journalism, the career politician, and the institutions of political conspiracy. They invented the words for (although not the fact of) self-interest. They invented, or rediscovered, the novel and one of its principle modes of investigation, free indirect discourse (what Joan Didion would later refer to as "the close third"). They improved the telescope and codified the scientific method, those key inventions of their seventeenth-century predecessors. They gave theoretical grounding to another seventeenth-century observation, namely, that there is a cratylitic disjunction be-

tween word and thing. Finally, eighteenth-century Britons invented full-bore scandal writing and legitimated the idea that the world is run by a secret cabal of shadowy powerful agents whose machinations have far-reaching effects and about whom boundless paranoia is warranted.

All these developments are indexed to a small but enormously potent cluster of concepts that center on the idea that knowledge is a form of exposure: knowing something means opening it up, laying it bare, flushing it out, uncovering it, stripping it down. The fantasy of exposure began as a conceptual instrument of Enlightenment reason. It is a close cousin of most theoretical and indeed scientific investigation from the eighteenth to the twenty-first centuries. But writers have also used exposure as a tool to analyze (break down into parts) the spurious claims of Enlightenment reason itself. Walter Benjamin famously wrote, in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," that "there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (Benjamin 1986, 256). Exposure is closely related to tropes of dissection ("dissecting reason") and anatomy. As Swift put it so acutely, long before there was the Enlightenment, let alone a counter-Enlightenment, "and then comes reason officiously, with tools for cutting, and opening, and mangling, and piercing, offering to demonstrate that [bodies] are not of the same consistence quite through" (*A Tale of a Tub,* sec. 9, "A Digression Concerning Madness").

Exposure is part of the metaphor spectrum that Barbara Stafford has brilliantly described, in *Body Criticism,* as the great Enlightenment project: thinkers sought to make sense of the unseen by means of abstraction, selection, articulation (carving up the joints of the world), analogy, extension, and geometry. The broadly Platonic regime of Enlightenment science held that the value resides in the invisible, the inner, the beyond. Accordingly, "forms were flayed and divested of superfluous ornament. Individuals were pared to écorchés by a ruthless peeling. Thus pithed and cored, they were made congruent to an undeceptive ideal nakedness, or to a profound sincerity" (Stafford 1993, 18).

Examples of what Stafford calls "this perpendicular inquisition" abound in eighteenth-century writing. The most palpable feeling associated with the all-encompassing search for a deeper, higher truth, unavailable to what Wordsworth called "the sad incompetence of human speech" (or other degraded modes of representation), is anxiety. Anxiety comes from living in a world that systematically deceives through its sophistical, tactile, comforting rhetoric. It comes from having to attain a heightened level of meaning through "theoretical agon or combat." Most writers found surpassing the material world to be a titanic enterprise, even though new methods of rationalization helped them tame the profusion of

sensory data. According to Stafford, "Prophetically, the eighteenth-century viewer's struggle to pierce to the bottom of all blurred visual signals—whether emanating from eroding ancient ruins or the confusing masquerade of fashionably covered modern bodies—seems to be fulfilled in twentieth-century transparent medical visualizations" (ibid., 26).

Here, however, we need to make a distinction. People fascinate us in a different way than things do. Although Stafford suggests a moral equivalence between the blurred visual signals that emanated from "eroding ancient ruins" and from "the confusing masquerade of fashionably covered modern bodies," even the most cursory glance at eighteenth-century British writing shows that the latter were incomparably more fascinating to people than the former. The fantasy of exposure had (and still has) an overwhelmingly social character. The "struggle to pierce to the bottom" became most intense at the brink of another person's soul. This is of course an ancient topos: tropes of opening and uncovering have always been powerful weapons in the war against the hypocrite and the artificer. What was new was the sheer persistence and degree. Open any eighteenth-century narrative—whether Delarivière Manley's *New Atalantis,* Defoe's *Moll Flanders,* or Richardson's *Clarissa.* The psychology is patterned on a surface/depth relationship, with true motives lying deeper than merely social ones. Consider this comical conversation between Clarissa and her older sister Arabella, who is jealous that their grandfather has left Clarissa a large passel of land.

> A pert young creature, vain and conceited, she called me. I was the only judge, in my own wise opinion, of what was right and fit. She, for her part, had long seen into my specious ways: And now I should shew every-body what I was at bottom.
>
> Dear Bella, said I! hands and eyes lifted up—why all this?—Dear, dear Bella, why—
>
> None of your dear, dear Bella's to me.—I tell you, I see thro' your witchcrafts (that was her strange word). And away she flung; adding, as she went, And so will every-body else very quickly, I dare say.
>
> Bless me, said I to myself, what a Sister have I!—How have I deserved this?
>
> Then I again regretted my Grandfather's too distinguishing goodness to me.
>
> (Richardson 1985, 63)

Arabella uses exposure as a tool to intimidate her sister. She reaches for an objective or neutral stance on her sister's selfish motives. Clarissa responds that Arabella's moral indignation is just jealousy with a halo (to paraphrase H. G. Wells). Richardson explores such psychological byways obsessively, as did the rest of his

culture. The culture's psychological pointillism went along with the several vocabularies bequeathed to eighteenth-century moralists—and everyone was one—by Frenchmen: from La Bruyère and La Rochefoucauld came the nascent vocabulary of self-interest (along with unrelenting cynicism about people's motives), and from Descartes and later La Mettrie came the vocabulary of mechanism.

Why would the fantasy of exposure have flourished in early eighteenth-century Britain? Exposure is at once archaeological and scientific, combining powerful interest with reductive explanation. It offers a quick and dirty purchase on the motives of other people. The question of how to explain other people was no idle or speculative one: touch down anywhere in the earlier part of the century, and the immediate feeling is of a constant, unending search for the sources of behavior. This intensely social mode is seemingly predicted in the closing lines of *Paradise Lost,* which relate that anticlimactic moment when Adam and Eve are expelled from paradise by the archangel Michael. After unfolding thunderous prophecies of books 11 and 12, Milton now offers a contrastingly modest, though perhaps more troubling, prediction about the shape that human thought will take in the future:

> In either hand the hast'ning angel caught
> Our ling'ring parents, and to th'eastern gate
> Led them direct, and down the cliff as fast
> To the subjected plain; then disappeared. (Bk. 12, lines 637–640)

Milton has Michael make no prophecies directly about the eighteenth century, but in retrospect we can see that this prediction came true: eighteenth-century poets and writers found themselves wandering around on a "subjected plain," trying to answer those Miltonic questions of "where to choose," how to choose, and indeed whether to choose providence as their guide. Poets, fiction writers, talebearers, and scandalmongers all had something to say about life on the subjected plain. Indeed, writers high and low made living there all the more pleasurable by taking as their major theme the question of what other people are like.

Much eighteenth-century literature is concerned with social perception, and yet social perception is too broad. It is focused specifically on unearthing motives. Canvassing a motive is one of the more prominent impulses on which much eighteenth-century writing comes into view. Think of the Miltonic opening of *The Rape of the Lock,* in which a question about why Adam and Eve would choose to disobey God inverts into a sneering suggestion of a lesbian cabal surrounding Queen Anne: "Say what strange motive, Goddess, could compel / A well-bred Lord t'assault a gentle Belle? / Oh say what stranger cause, yet unexplor'd /

Cou'd make a gentle Belle reject a Lord?" Pope—young, ambitious, classical, not yet bitter—lavishes his pointillist aesthetic attention on those sylphid cabalists surrounding his heroine Belinda, imagining a shimmer of she-men suspended slightly above the social scene and manipulating its workings.

Pope's vision of a quasi-supernatural group of secret plotters can stand as a modest shorthand for a large cultural shift in causal attribution that occurred, unevenly, in the wake of the scientific revolution; two less-modest shorthands would be secularization and the invention of a media-driven celebrity culture. Gordon Wood has traced some paradoxes in the rise of conspiratorial thinking in the eighteenth-century transatlantic world. On the one hand, Wood argues, the Machiavellian plot-driven world of seventeenth-century politics was becoming abstracted as social theory became more sophisticated and as it became clear that "society was composed not simply of great men and their retainers but of numerous groups, interests, and classes whose actions could not be easily deciphered." On the other hand, psychology was becoming rationalized: by analogy to Newtonian physics, philosophers such as Hume were beginning to discern lawlike regularities in individual and social behavior (Wood 1982, 414). As Wood elegantly puts it, "earlier, men had sought to decipher the concealed or partially revealed will of God; now they sought to understand the concealed or partially revealed wills of human beings. That, in a nutshell, was what being enlightened was all about" (420).

In that case, enlightenment was a matter of universal suspicion. Terry Castle has described the period's pervasive obsession with masquerade as the feeling that "one's only defense against treachery is a perpetual radical vigilance. The best epistemology consists in the expectation—a constant unmasking in advance, so to speak—of global deceit" (Castle 1986, 178).

I have only pushed the question back a level. Exposure is clearly useful as a mode of social information gathering, but why? The answer has partly to do with some deep features of human psychology that I explored in the introduction to this book. People are unusually interested in stories that involve detecting and exposing free riders, those who take a bit more in the way of social benefit than they pay out in cost. This intuition has been borne out by those experiments in social reasoning done by Leda Cosmides and John Tooby in the late 1980s (see Introduction). Recall that Cosmides and Tooby found that people did fairly badly in tests of general logic skills, but when the same tests were designed to ask people to detect violators of the social contract, the results improved enormously. This suggests that people are not likely to be equally interested in just any story. Especially in a climate of general worry about trade and obligation, they are more

likely to be interested in stories that tell them how to detect cheaters or show them cheaters exposed. They are also likely to be interested in stories of virtue rewarded, although as we will see later, those stories are likely to turn vertiginously into stories of cheaters detected.

All this is why the fantasy of exposure held sway. What might be some of its effects? Eighteenth-century British culture is marked by awareness, corresponding to real historical changes, of increasing social complexity. Historians on both the right and the left have noted the same pattern of progress. Since the early eighteenth century, writes Alan Macfarlane, at varying rates across Europe, Asia, and the Americas, there has been

> an opening and leveling of knowledge. The closed worlds of priesthood and literati have begun to wither before mass education, the rapid spread of printing and other communications technology, the growth of skepticism and tolerance. The inquisition has been formally suspended and the thought police pensioned off in many parts of the world. The ordinary educated citizen may not have specialist knowledge in many fields, but the division of knowledge is no longer between the one who has keys to all that is known and the nineteen who are totally excluded. The emancipation of women in many parts of the world has been partially achieved, though huge inequalities remain. Foot binding and suttee have been abolished, and though bride-burning and female circumcision and purdah still continue, there is little doubt that an impressive shift in power has occurred. Few, in the West at least, would openly subscribe to the view of women as a sinful, inferior creature, born to be the slave of man. (Macfarlane 2000, 6)

Macfarlane is a conservative apostle of freedom: he argues that Britain is the birthplace of civil liberties because of a unique political and economic structure of individual yeomanry and low taxes. Conversely, historians on the left, such as John Brewer and Neil McKendrick, have located the mechanisms of change in the birth of a bureaucratic state, the growth of a regulated marketplace, and the penetration of aristocratic norms of politeness into the middle classes (McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb 1982). Another mechanism of change was the increasing vulnerability of powerful persons to exposure. Since the eighteenth century, the fantasy of exposure has been emotionally connected with the spread of democratic values. The story goes like this: a powerful person commits some venal sin, typically involving sex or graft. He tries to cover it up. The public interest demands that the story be uncovered. Exposure concentrates overwhelmingly on powerful people or on people who seem to want to get power, expressing the

collectivist point that the general good depends on a system of moral if not economic taxation. The fantasy of exposure enforces the moralizing program of civilization through something we are inclined to do anyway, namely, gossip about high-status people. No amount of repetition seems to makes the exposure story less fascinating.

This is all teleological speculation on my part. In what follows, I show how important the fantasy of exposure was to the novel. Finally, I allow myself to speculate a bit more about the ambivalence of the fantasy of exposure in a system of early capitalism.

The fantasy of exposure is, above all, a perfect vehicle for narrative interest. Early novels were often written as stories of the "secret springs" that "animate" its characters. Both *Jonathan Wild* (1743), Henry Fielding's sarcastic allegory about a great thief-taker (and figure for Prime Minister Robert Walpole), and William Godwin's *Things as They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794) use that language to expose the deranged and deranging selfishness of powerful males, although for Fielding the metaphor is fluvial whereas for Godwin it is mechanical. Here is Godwin's narrator, Caleb Williams, in the opening paragraphs, describing the mix of curiosity and paranoia that animate him:

> The spring of action which, perhaps more than any other, characterised the whole train of my life, was curiosity. It was this that gave me my mechanical turn; I was desirous of tracing the variety of effects which might be produced from given causes. It was this that made me a sort of natural philosopher; I could not rest till I had acquainted myself with the solutions that had been invented for the phenomena of the universe. In fine, this produced in me an invincible attachment to books of narrative and romance. I panted for the unraveling of an adventure with an anxiety, perhaps almost equal to that of the man whose future happiness or misery depended on its issue. I read, I devoured compositions of this sort. They took possession of my soul; and the effects they produced were frequently discernible in my external appearance and my health. My curiosity, however, was not entirely ignoble: village anecdotes and scandal had no charms for me: my imagination must be excited; and when that was not done, my curiosity was dormant. (Godwin 1977, 6)

For Caleb, curiosity is the precondition of knowledge, and knowledge has a decidedly social, indeed literary, aim—but only if its objects are suitably elevated and displaced; the low gossip of the village disgusts him. The plot of the novel brings him into the service of an Italianized Englishman fatally tainted with no-

tions of blood honor, who rules benevolently over a decaying squirearchy. Caleb's master, Falkland, finds himself in conflict with a brutish rival, Barnabas Tyrrel; after suffering repeated insults, Falkland kills Tyrrel in a secret fight. Falkland then allows a local villager to be hanged for the murder, but Caleb becomes suspicious about Falkland's "impenetrability." Indeed, he tells us, "the more impenetrable Mr. Falkland was determined to be, the more uncontrollable was my curiosity" (ibid., 108). Caleb's curiosity leads him to open a mysterious locked trunk during a fire in the house; Falkland catches him in the act and threatens to kill him, but eventually he confesses to the murder of Tyrrel. It is better, he says to Caleb, to confess than "to live in perpetual fear of your penetration" (136). The roles of pursuer and pursued are soon reversed, however. Caleb leaves Falkland's service only to find that he has become a criminal on charges that Falkland has trumped up. I will let John Bender relate the plot from this point on:

> Caleb feels himself under universal surveillance because his story has been widely circulated by folktale and criminal broadside. He undertakes a series of disguises before being captured in London by a seemingly omniscient agent named Gines. He breaks the oath of secrecy (that he had sworn to Falkland) but no magistrate will countenance his accusation and he is returned to prison. Released, and seemingly free when Falkland declines to appear against him, Caleb begins a new life in Wales only to have it destroyed when Gines seeds the town with an old broadside. Debarred from exile and informed that Falkland intends England to be his lifelong prison, Caleb resolves to assail his patron with a full and circumstantial written narrative—that is with the novel we are reading—and to accuse Falkland once more on his home ground. (Bender 1995, 266)

Caleb Williams is the first of many plots of paranoid pursuit and homosexual male doubling (Godwin's daughter Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* and Freud's Schreber case are both indebted to it). Godwin expresses power inequality as a gender difference. The logic of the gaze is feminizing. In a famous postscript, Godwin explains that he derived his plot from the Bluebeard story:

> Falkland was my Bluebeard, who had perpetrated atrocious crimes, which if discovered, he might expect to have all the world roused to revenge against him. Caleb Williams was the wife, who in spite of warning, persisted in his attempts to discover the forbidden secret; and, when he had succeeded, struggled as fruitlessly to escape the consequences, as the wife of Bluebeard in washing the key of the ensanguined chamber, who, as often as she cleared the stain of

> blood from the one side, found it showing itself with frightful distinctness on the other. (Godwin 1977, 340–41)

"Caleb Williams was the wife": Godwin draws from his cache a story about has a proud male criminal and a female victim who refuses to go quietly, using her wiles instead to expose his crimes. When Godwin comes to imagine a power difference, he gives it full psychological flesh by writing it as a gender difference. Why? What is it about relations between men and women that so acutely express the psychological burdens of power? One answer is that gender differences are close differences. Men and women live with each other in great intimacy, each gender constituting a web of reasons and constraints for the other. Each gender is also the personal face of status difference for the other. Much heterosexual ambivalence, it seems to me, has to do with this. For a woman, the face of a beloved son or husband can also be a daily reminder of her own disinheritance.

More mysterious is the tendency of power differences to express themselves as gender differences—even between two men. The reason may be quite simple again, though: gender differences are usually people's first and most intimate experience of power differences. People reason not abstractly about social problems but concretely. Many eighteenth-century male writers—Godwin, Boswell, Sterne, Richardson, and Pope (to move in reverse chronology)—use gender to make vivid their obsessions because they live inside it every day; gender is what they know best. Jill Campbell makes this point beautifully, showing in detail how fantasies of gender difference animate all of Henry Fielding's writings (Campbell 1995).

I return to the topic of gender at the end of the chapter, but here I want to take up the fantasy of exposure from another angle. Godwin is sometimes credited with being the first to use free indirect discourse in a systematic way (Bender 1995, 262). In a postscript to *Caleb Williams* written three decades later, Godwin himself called attention to what he considered the crucial innovation in his style. This innovation, he says, consisted in shifting the story's narration from the standard third person to the first person in order to "make the hero of my tale his own historian." The advantage of this stylistic maneuver, he claimed, was great:

> It was infinitely the best adapted, at least, to my vein of delineation, where the thing in which my imagination reveled the most freely, was the analysis of the private and internal operations of the mind, employing my metaphysical dissecting knife in tracing and laying bare the involutions of motive, and recording the gradually accumulating impulses, which led the personages I had to describe primarily to adopt the particular way of proceeding in which they afterwards embarked. (Ibid., 339)

Godwin may have believed his metaphysical dissecting knife to be the first-person singular point of view, but as Bender shows, he went much further than that without acknowledging it. Bender points out that "not only is the nominally first-person account of fact in Caleb Williams shot through with knowledge about past events and motives that no single individual could possibly possess, but also the field of narration is fractured by sentences that render consciousness in encoded free indirect discourse" (ibid. , 267).

Godwin stages two special moments of encoded free indirect discourse. According to Bender, they both occur when Caleb is retelling the history of Falkland and Tyrrel in the third person; "both thematize a sense of powerlessness on the part of the entered subject. These are our only points of access in the novel to reflections by Tyrrel and Falkland, who otherwise remain opaque precisely because they mark one pole in an opposition with transparency that Godwin in general maintains" (ibid., 269). Caleb starts narrating the thoughts of Tyrrel and Falkland as though he had complete access to them when he needs to express just how unjustly Tyrrel and Falkland feel about the actions of their rivals. Here is Tyrrel worrying about having been intellectually bested by Falkland:

> It was only necessary for him to be the enemy of any person, to insure that person's being safe against the reach of misfortune. What insults, the most shocking and repeated, had he received from this paltry girl! And by whom was she now torn from his indignation? By that devil that haunted him at every moment, that crossed him at every step, that fixed at pleasure his arrows in his heart, and made mows and mockery at his insufferable tortures. (80)

Here is Falkland after Tyrrel has kicked him to the ground in a public hall:

> He had repeatedly exerted the most uncommon energy and prudence to prevent the misunderstanding between Mr. Tyrrel and himself from proceeding to extremities; but in vain! It was closed with a catastrophe exceeding all that he had feared, or that the most penetrating foresight could have suggested. To Mr. Falkland disgrace was worse than death. The slightest breath of dishonour would have stung him to the very soul. . . . His mind was full of uproar. . . . He wished for annihilation. . . . Horror, detestation, revenge, inexpressible longings . . . filled his soul even to bursting. (96)

A few moments later Tyrrel is found dead outside the hall, and the plot conflicts are set into motion. A villager named Hawkins is tried and hanged for the murder. Despite the mass of psychological evidence that Falkland wanted revenge on Tyrrel, nobody but Caleb thinks it possible that he committed murder. Indeed,

nobody but Caleb *could* think that, since squires are automatically given the benefit of the doubt in a way that peasants and serfs are not—but of course Caleb Williams is the wife who sees Falkland's mental state up close. The political point of Godwin's novel is that such psychological exposure is one of the few tools that the poor and weak have to unseat the strong; the law is little protection against a system that rigorously favors the higher-status claimant against the lower-status one. To us this may seem obvious; as sophisticated readers of detective fiction who do not need to have the connection between motive and deed spelled out for us so directly. Sherlock Holmes and others have trained us to consider motive as one of the main sources of evidence. Caleb faces a worse problem. He has all the access in the world to Falkland's motives (so he thinks), but it does him no good because in his corrupt power-mad milieu, nobody is inclined to credit psychology more than rank.

Let me move rapidly to the point. Godwin stumbles on free indirect discourse because he needs a technique that will show his readers how psychology can count as an even stronger motive than class position. He invents free indirect discourse to express a complicated point of view—the resentment one man feels when he is outwitted or beaten by another man. Free indirect discourse is the technique that allows him to show what status feels like from the inside. In fact, his experiment shows us a good deal more than that, and some of what it shows us is disturbing. It shows us that psychological interest, too, comes from an interest in power. The problem of what to make of powerful people sharpens and focuses the mind in a way that other problems do not.

The history of formal innovation turns out to be punctuated by turns just like this. Literary popularity reflects the importance of what people care about. What people care about turns out to be making inferences and solving problems, but solving problems in a particular mode. At least that is what the legacy of the eighteenth-century novel suggests. The fantasy of exposure is closely connected to innovations in novelistic form; long before Godwin, it was even more closely connected to innovations in novelistic subjectivity. Godwin's technical innovations are simply a better way to get a purchase on the questions that so fascinated readers of the early novel. Authors had to work hard to fight against their readers taking the wrong kind of interest in their characters. They found to their chagrin that stories of virtue were less fascinating than stories of vice and that exposure was a way to turn the first into the second.

The fantasy of exposure became most aggressive when sexual interest and self-interest converged. They converged, notoriously, in the person of Pamela, Samuel Richardson's famously virtuous maidservant who resists her lecherous master's

advances only to be rewarded with a proposal of marriage. Pamela was at one time the most cared-about literary character in history. To confront Richardson's massively popular and profoundly influential novel of 1740—a novel that more than any other, more than *Robinson Crusoe,* more than *Moll Flanders,* more than *Oroonoko,* has been credited with originating the entire genre, not just in England but in France, Russia, and Japan—is to confront immediately the way a text is born into a fallen world of interpretation. The novel's reception is storied: "a tidal wave of lachrymose praise," a "modern industrial product, generating new editions with testimonials, murals in Vauxhall gardens, critiques, parodies, translations, plays (one by Voltaire and two by Goldoni), engravings, six operas, a Heroic Poem, a pictorial fan, two waxworks, and several sequels tracing 'Pamela in High Life,' including one by Richardson himself" (Turner 1994a, 76). *Pamela* became the first cultural product to have its own line of product spin-offs (Turner 1994b).

*Pamela* also sponsored a high degree of resistance. Readers found themselves so disgusted by Richardson's "fantasy of successful social climbing" (Turner 1994a, 73) that they responded by writing satirical attacks, several of which became as famous as *Pamela* itself. These attacks, collectively known as the work of the "anti-Pamelists," include Henry Fielding's *Shamela* and *Joseph Andrews,* John Cleland's pornographic *Fanny Hill; or, Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure;* the anonymous *Pamela Censured 1741* (to which Richardson responded directly in Pamela's third edition), and Eliza Haywood's *Anti Pamela; or, Feign'd Innocence Detected: The Scandalous Life of Syrena Tricksy.* The attackers accuse Richardson of two things: first, of staging pornographic set pieces to titillate his readers, and second, of creating a character whose virtue is strategic or feigned, a "sham." This is Fielding's famous reading. Shamela uses her "vartue" instrumentally to capture Squire Booby's hand and his estate. Richardson was stung by such resistance, and he defended against both charges in the revised third edition of the novel. He cut back the scenes that his attackers had found sexually salacious and increased the didactic energy of Pamela's submission to her new husband. He was so clearly anxious about those two charges that he printed elaborate commendations to his novel's virtues in its later editions.

He had also already woven defenses against both charges into the fabric of his novel by putting them in the mouths of his characters. The novel is obsessed with the way meaning can go awry. In Pamela's first letter, written to her father, she worries about being "forced" to return home. She delights in her master's goodness upon her lady's death. She praises her young master's kindness and then adds a postscript relating how her master scared her by coming into her writing closet. The reply she gets from her father is much darker and less celebratory: he

explains to Pamela that her master's kindness is surely meant to bring about an exchange for "that jewel, your virtue." Pamela proves an able student of the new code of the fallen world—perhaps too able, because she briefly and mistakenly entertains the notion that *anybody* who is civil to her (including matronly Mrs. Jervis) has designs against her (Richardson 1741, 1:6).

The first sentence of the novel is "I have great Trouble, and some Comfort, to acquaint you with." "Trouble" is the novelistic (and Christian) equivalent of the epic *menin*—the "wrath" of Achilles, which begins the action of *The Iliad.* Trouble is the always the best way to make characters and people rounder, as in the favorite Nietzschean formula of the new age: whatever doesn't kill you will make you stronger. In the face of these obstacles, Pamela begins to collect herself and establish an identity. This identity takes a few different forms: for example an obsessive repetition of her name, a delimiting of the spaces around her, and an attention to her clothing.[1] She forms her identity by latching onto things. She personifies different parts of herself, a mode clearly indebted to Puritan spiritual autobiography, in several passages in which she uses the vocative to speak to her own heart. This external mode becomes sadly literalized in the suicide scene, when Pamela throws a bundle of her clothing in the fishpond and then thinks about joining it (ibid., 1:223).

But these modes of identification are dangerous. Mr. B., fresh from his libertine world of strategies and counterstrategies, can use them to his advantage against her by seizing some part of her, as he does repeatedly with her clothing. To get inside her clothes is to possess her. Consider Mr. B's aggressive pursuit of Pamela's inner libertine, a pursuit that allows Richardson to stage the pornographic scenes that seemed so scandalous to his readers. Drawing on a well-established body of libertine theory about female sexuality whose central tenet was, in Pope's words, that "every woman is at heart a rake," Mr. B. depicts Pamela as a female libertine, a "hussy" and a "sorceress" with a "little, plotting, guileful Heart!" He reimagines plots (of novels, of writing, of marriage) as traps to ensnare him. Exposure is the vehicle for Mr. B's erotic interest. He probes Pamela's physical recesses as a ploy to read her mind:

> We were standing most of this Time; but he then sat down, and took me by both my Hands, and said, Well said, my pretty Pamela, If you can help it! But I will not let you help it. Tell me, Are they in your Pocket? No, Sir, said I, my Heart up at my Mouth. Said he, I know you won't tell a downright Fib for the World; but for Equivocation! no Jesuit ever went beyond you. Answer me then, Are they in neither of your Pockets? No, Sir, said I. Are they not, said he, about your

> Stays? No, Sir, reply'd I: but pray, no more Questions; for ask me ever so much, I will not tell you.
>
> O, said he, I have a way for that. I can do as they do abroad, when the Criminals won't confess; torture them till they do.—But pray, Sir, said I, Is this fair, just, or honest? I am no Criminal; and I won't confess. (Ibid., 2: 19)

As he frisks her body, Mr. B. offers Pamela several roles to try on. He wonders if she is a Jesuit or a criminal. He even offers to torture her until she confesses. Seeking to understand her, he draws on some partially sketched-in characters—exotic types that he has certainly never met but that seem to him to express live psychological possibilities for the provincial maidservant before him. Of course, he is flirting, too. He hopes to tempt her to reveal what she wants by provoking her to identify with one or another tactic. He uses character sketches instrumentally—just as Fielding will later use Shamela and Joseph Andrews—to unmask her. Character sketches are among Mr. B's most powerful tools of exposure.

Here, for the first time, we begin to realize that Richardson stands in conflict with one of his own characters. Richardson's version of the marriage plot is designed to integrate Pamela's virtue with Mr. B's estate. Mr. B's proposition is more direct. Mr. B. knows what Richardson's readers care about, even if Richardson does not care to know. And not just Richardson's readers but the other characters in the novel. Most of them spend at least some of their time wondering about Mr. B and Pamela's sex life. Once Mr. B's sister, Lady Davers, even goes rushing into their bedroom to confirm with her own eyes that the pair are having sex. Cleland, of course, will fling open the bedroom door in his pornographic anti-Pamelist masterpiece *Fanny Hill* (1748).

Pamela faces a different set of problems. She has chosen a mode of identity (working from outside in) that divides her and lays her open to the charge of deceitfulness. The suicide scene once again: Pamela speaks to the clothes she has thrown into the pond and imagines what will happen when she joins them. Joining them is tantamount to joining herself together again, albeit at the cost of increased self-division for other people around her. Here are her thoughts about how everyone will make sense of her death:

> And my Master, my angry Master, will then forget his Resentments, and say, O this is the unhappy Pamela! that I have so causelessly persecuted and destroy'd! Now do I see she preferr'd her Honesty to her Life, will he say, and is no Hypocrite, nor Deceiver; but really was the innocent Creature she pretended to be! Then, thought I, will he perhaps shed a few Tears over the poor Corpse of his persecuted Servant; and, tho' he may give out, it was Love

> and Disappointment . . . yet will he be inwardly griev'd, and order me a decent Funeral, and save me, or rather this Part of me, from the dreadful Stake, and the Highway Interrment; and the young Men and Maidens around my dear Father's will pity poor Pamela! But O! I hope I shall not be the Subject of their Ballads and Elegies, but that my Memory, for the sake of my dear Father and Mother, may quickly slide into Oblivion! (Ibid., 2: 229)

Pamela imagines that in death she will achieve what very few people do when they are alive: a smooth, constant, integrated self. It is important that such a consistent self be something that other people give her (by taking her as a fit subject for their ballads and elegies); just as other people can divide her by calling her a hypocrite. Pamela hates the way that other people imagine her in order to dissect her, reducing her down to size in order to make sense of her. Indeed, most of the novel consists of Pamela's conflicts with other characters over the kind of reduction they will practice. Most typical is the kind she has already practiced on herself, namely, division. Division is a useful mode of reduction because it allows other characters to fantasize about finding some consistent character at the heart of another person.

This way of forming an identity is dangerous not only for Pamela but also for Richardson. After Defoe and the opera seria, the novelist's problem was how to represent Pamela's interiority. Richardson finds an antithetical method—Pamela, as I said, personifies her heart—but finds that his tools to hand are strangely open to manipulation by one of his own characters. In the suicide scene, again, Pamela's heart takes on some of Mr. B's qualities: "my poor Heart beating all the Time against my Bosom, as if it would have forc'd its way thro' it." Richardson and Pamela are thus in the strangely similar position of both defending their virtue against the importunities of Mr. B.

Much more scandalous than the charge of sexual interest, however, is the charge of self-interest. I think this charge worried Richardson so much that he allowed the last third of his novel to become deformed. He has his bad characters—Mrs. Jewkes and Lady Davers, Mr. B's hostile sister—obsessively repeat the charge of self-interest so that Mr. B can defend Pamela against it, and Pamela can show us once again how obedient she is to her husband. To her accusers and to her parents, Richardson has his heroine repeat her story again and again in ever-smaller versions, as though by miniaturizing it he can get it down to a few easy rules. If he can only apply the didactic lesson directly to the brains of his readers, he no longer need worry that they can skew his meaning. In fact, the first and second parts of the novel mirror each other: the juicy sensuous narrative punctured oc-

casionally by moral sententiae of the first part gives way to moral sententiae whittled down to their regulative core and punctured less and less frequently by narrative. Didacticism eventually drains away the psychological interest, leaving his heroine gasping for vivacity. How ironic that during the first two-thirds of the novel, Pamela should have worried so much about how other characters imagine her reductively. Once the charge of self-interest is raised, Pamela has to slink away from the eye of the world, reducing herself to a mere "cypher," who, "nothing worth in myself, shall give signification by my place" (ibid., 2: 201).

If the committed anti-Pamelist thinks that she should just throw up her hands and go read *Tom Jones,* she might find her interest revived by a little scene at the end of the novel, in which Pamela goes to church and finds herself lost in a crowd of poor people:

> My dear Master handed me into the Chariot, and stood talking with Sir Thomas Atkyns, at the Door of it, (who was making him abundance of Compliments, being a very ceremonious Gentleman, a little to Extreme in that way) and I believe, to familiarize me to the Gazers, which concern'd me a little; for I was dash'd to hear the Praises of the Country People, and to see how they crowded about the Chariot. Several poor People begg'd my Charity, and I beckon'd John with my Fan, and said, Divide, in the further Church Porch, that Money to the Poor, and let them come to-morrow Morning to me, and I will give them something more, if they don't importune me now.—So I gave them all the Silver I had, which happen'd to be between Twenty and Thirty Shillings; and this drew away from me their clamorous Prayers for Charity. (Ibid., 2: 376)

Pamela's trouble seems to be that she is too beautiful and too popular. Unlike the simple villagers of Slough, who rang bells to celebrate Pamela's wedding day when the book was read to them by the village blacksmith, this group of common people has not read the novel and thus cannot be expected to heed Richardson's warnings against taking too much interest in his paragon. They swarm around her like a cloud of bees, and she points her fan at John and instructs him to divide the money "in the further church porch." But enough, enough! The obsessive anti-Pamelist hereby confesses her shame at having even noticed this little scene. Fascination with high-status icons may be the vice of the crowd, but the fantasy of exposure is the private hell of that nattering nabob of negativism, the sophisticated reader.

It is in this sad company that Richardson would have to class himself. The career of his words, once launched, turned out to be unpredictable even to him. Moreover, it only got worse. In 1755, after he had written his three great novels,

*Pamela, Clarissa,* and *Sir Charles Grandison,* he published a conduct book called *A Collection of the Moral and Instructive Sentiments, Maxims, Cautions, and Reflexions, Contained in the Histories of Pamela, Clarissa, and Sir Charles Grandison . . . to which are subjoined letters from the editor of those works* (1755). He simply culled the moral sententiae out of his three novels and appended his own editorial material.

On the other hand, Richardson became a great artist by writing against himself. As James Turner points out, Richardson's tragedy *Clarissa* is the greatest anti-Pamelist text of all (Turner 1994a, 1). Its heroine knows exactly what she wants at all times and is always sure of her reasons. Those reasons, more importantly, never stray too far away from the bone of pragmatism, so as not to create an opening for exposure.

Life in a regime of public scrutiny was painful for everyone, yet the burden fell most squarely upon women, who, along with politicians, were considered especially duplicitous. This was nothing new, as even the most casual glance at Spenser or Milton's great snake women shows. Nevertheless, from the 1710s through the 1730s a deeply Juvenalian misogyny drove the culture's discussion about women. Why? The fantasy of exposure surely played a role. In the climate of universal suspicion, satire was the major voice in the overall discussion about what other people were like. Satirists chose to ask how free people are to choose their lot. They framed the discussion largely in the context of the sex/gender system. They sponsored one of the most interesting discussions ever about the relationship between facts and values and about how social norms force individual choices. Richardson took part in that discussion, but his conclusions are radically different from those of his predecessors. To see why, and what consequences Richardson's novel had, I will briefly sketch the story of another virgin—indeed, of another woman named Pamela.

The virgin/whore dichotomy is as close to a human universal as we are likely to find; it has governed a large portion of sacred and secular law for the human species throughout history. Even those of us who live in advanced capitalist economies, where women are much more free than they are in theocratic regimes, have run up against it in a mild or strong form at some point—as a story told us by our families, as an advertising ploy, as a norm subtly expressed. There is nothing essential about it: it can be breached if economic and medical conditions allow women the same freedom of choice as men have. Richardson's Pamela, like Pope's *Rape of the Lock* (a work written twenty years earlier), tells the story of a young woman whose virginity is the most important fact about her. Both describe a woman who is, from the point of view of her male suitors, im-

possibly modest but thereby more appealing. Both dramatize that young woman's entrance into a social world in which her role is conceived of as wife and mother. Both sympathetically detail the ways young women resist the expectations that society thrusts upon them; and yet both take a strong line on why women should not resist those social expectations. Both view marriage vows as constitutive of the social order, and both seem repulsed by the way that libertine young men can charivari their way out of taking those vows. Both agree that the social contract is centered on the woman's capacity to trade on her virginity. Pope imagines, as Freud and many other writers would later, that a young woman goes through a lesbian period before achieving full heterosexual maturity. Richardson raises the lesbian specter in the person of Mrs. Jewkes; whereas John Cleland, who rewrote Pamela as pornography, gives his heroine over for a time to Sapphic diversions.

Both Richardson and Pope sympathize with the subservient population. They are interested, as artists, in the way that women can come to choose their fates. The major difference between them is that Pope uses his artistic skill to express the way that living in a rigid system leads to psychological contradiction. Pope's women are extremely constrained by the roles on offer to them. Pope has no special theory about why women are forced to assume impossible postures, nor is he inclined to envision a psychological role that allows them to do anything more complicated than peacefully accept their constraints. Yet his acuteness about gender is uncanny. Consider his incredibly radical freestanding character sketch of "Pamela" in an early poem, "Epistle to Miss Blount with the Works of Voiture" (1712). The lines are part of a sequence that begins: "Too much your sex is by their forms confined . . . Made Slaves by Honour, and made fools by Shame." Here, to illustrate that point, is Pamela:

> The Gods, to curse Pamela with her prayers,
> Gave the gilt Coach and dappl'd Flanders Mares,
> The Shining Robes, rich Jewels, Beds of State,
> And to compleat her Bliss, a Fool for Mate.
> She glares in Balls, Front-Boxes, and the Ring,
> A vain, unquiet, glitt'ring wretched Thing!
> Pride, Pomp, and State but reach her outward Part,
> She sighs, and is no Duchess at her heart. (Lines 49–56)

This early poem is part of what might be called Pope's marriage group, which most famously includes *The Rape of the Lock*. Pope wrote it when he was about twenty, during one of the periods in his life (there were others later) when he was obsessed with sex, sexuality, and gender as the most intense form of what it

means to possess an identity at all. The marriage group offers observations on gender that, although they never coalesce into a theory, are evidence nonetheless of an analytical obsession that continued throughout his life in different forms. His later interest in the myriad ways that political power could deceive was just an interest in gender by other means. In this particular portrait, Pope distinguishes between the perverting sex/gender system and Pamela herself, who has no conception of what it is to want or choose anything. Because the surface (the shining robes) does not line up with her own desires, Pamela has become a mystery to herself.

Pope's women dramatize the way that the sex/gender system can put so much pressure on a person that she becomes incoherent. Richardson, by contrast, is interested in creating stories in which the natural and the social converge. The problem is that they almost never do, or at least not in any way that we can easily accept. Richardson takes a fairy tale—the hypergamy plot, the plot of virtue rewarded—and reworks it so that his characters' personal choices are consonant with the larger story. However, to choose to live out a larger story leaves you open to the charge that you are merely strategizing. Consider several recent versions of Richardson's fairy tale. In the past few years, there has been a surge of nauseating advice books written by and for women. These include *The Rules: Time Tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right* (a giant diamond ring glitters on the cover), *A Return to Modesty: Recovering the Lost Virtue,* and *The Surrendered Wife: A Practical Guide for Finding Intimacy, Passion, and Peace with a Man.* These books are the proud backlash against the second wave of feminism. Their authors argue that despite some spectacular gains in economic freedom, women have only become unhappier. If women could realize that biology is destiny, they would fashion their behavior accordingly. Men do not marry loose girls, so the best way to get a man to propose is to act like a virgin. This means not initiating conversations, not agreeing to sex, not putting oneself forward; it means allowing men to take the lead in courting, paying, driving, dancing, deciding. Doing so will reduce conflict and give women a greater sense of freedom, paradoxically, by accepting constraint. Women should become chaste and coy not because it is intrinsically good or valuable for them to do so, but because they will be happier if they accept the way men are and simply submit to them.

This genre of advice never fails to shock: the response to all of these books in the popular press has been moral outrage. Why? These books counsel deception, strategy, and advancement through covert means. They counsel passive aggression. Moreover, they are profoundly philosophically contradictory. They argue that people are hardwired in a certain way. To increase her happiness, a woman

should accept the parameters of her hardwiring and adjust herself to them. However, acting out the hardwiring is no easy task; in fact, a woman has to be taught how to do it. If values simply arise from facts, why do people need to learn to express them? What these books show is that getting values and facts to line up is hard work. The picture of the self they counsel is a self conceived of as a set of strategies and counterstrategies.

What does it mean to inhabit a normative system fully and ideologically? This is one of the questions of modernity, and Richardson is the first person to pose it. He poses it not skeptically but hopefully, at least in his first novel. By the time his readers had finished mocking the possibility that someone could believe her own propaganda, Richardson seemed to agree with them by dramatizing in *Clarissa* the more familiar Christian position that the truly good person is too fine for the coarse world.

The choice between Richardson and Pope is a choice between a regime of exposure and a regime in which people are unknowable. It is a choice between modernity and premodernity. Which is worse? The cost of bringing women into discourse is that they become deceptive. Personhood begins to consist of an exchange of strategies; it is open to manipulation by ideologues of all sorts. The alternative is to view people, women especially, as radically incoherent. The choice between a regime of exposure and a regime before the birth of the modern self is really a choice between having a choice, with all the confusion and "trouble" that commits a person to, and not having a choice at all.

# *God Novels*

As the controversy over *Pamela* shows, ever since the first novels rolled off the printing presses in the eighteenth century, debates have raged about why they fascinate people. Is it their middle-class subject matter and focus on courtship and marriage? Is it the way they coyly pretend to be moralistic while slipping in the occasional naughty bit? Is it their shameless appeal to the ungovernable imaginations of adolescent girls? Does it have something to do with the way realism glitters in ever-tinier pinpricks of light? This debate has preoccupied literary critics for more than two hundred and fifty years. But just when it seems that literary critics have said all there is to say, novelists can be counted on to revive the debate. In fact, some of the debate's most interesting entries have been logged by novelists themselves. Not just the novelists who write criticism, like Henry James, Virginia Woolf, and John Updike, but novelists who place the question of what makes novels so interesting at the very center of their art—Woolf and James, again, but also Austen and Charlotte Brontë and Flaubert. In asking the question, they renovate the whole tradition.

Just such a novelist is Ian McEwen, whose superb novel *Atonement* (2002) is, among other things, a brilliant meditation on his chosen form. McEwen deftly surveys the history of the novel, asks what is psychologically compelling about it, and lands on the dueling perspectives offered by two books written in 1748: Fielding's *Tom Jones* and Richardson's *Clarissa*. What moves us about these writers? What gives them psychological life? And what—you can almost hear him asking—can I do about it at such a distance? McEwen's answer is subtle and intricate. Indeed, the question appears at first to be rather marginal from the perspective of a novel that features such bravura effects as a first-person description of what goes through a man's mind when he has an orgasm and a stunning tableau of the Battle of Dunkirk. But it isn't marginal. The question of what makes a novel psychologically compelling is central to McEwen, central to Richardson and Fielding, and central to the tradition that at once connects him to them and dispossesses him. The best way to come to grips with the question is

to try to say something quite general about human psychology, the sort of thing that goes well beyond what any of these writers say themselves. I will have occasion to turn to some recent findings in cognitive science and evolutionary psychology, findings about the psychology of social information and what makes other people interesting to us. I turn to cognitive science not, I should say, to settle questions about these brilliant, difficult novels in advance, but rather to get the questions I want to ask off the ground and to give them a shape adequate to their complexity.

Fielding and Richardson represent the beginnings of what I call the high mind-reading tradition in the English novel. By this designation I mean several things. Most broadly I mean the social novel, the novel in which the narrative interest comes from the way the characters interact and from the vast question of what other people are like. The social novel is an eighteenth-century innovation, but it is only one small, if highly influential, strand in the history of the novel itself. Other strands include adventure, detection, science, and fantasy—these are largely eighteenth-century inventions, too. In these genres, however, social interaction is decidedly not the main source of interest. Daniel Defoe, for example, might be seen as the progenitor of a low mind-reading tradition in the novel: his picaresque focus on serial encounters often seems designed to avoid social interaction altogether. One almost never finds any descriptions of eyes, faces, or emotional states in a Defoe novel, as though the texts themselves are strangely autistic. His characters almost never make eye contact.

But by the high mind-reading tradition I also mean something quite technical. At the center of a high mind-reading novel is a narrator who adopts the standpoint of an agent with full access to strategic social information and who parcels out that information at markedly different rates, placing some characters and even the reader in a temporarily blinded position.[1] I recognize that this formula is dauntingly abstract, but I hope to justify it. Before I begin, let me make another claim, itself dauntingly abstract, which will require the rest of this chapter to unfold. The high mind-reading novel thus conceived sets McEwen a problem that *Atonement* rather spectacularly tries to work through. The problem is this: a high mind-reading novel only makes sense in the presence of God, who stands as the final guarantor of full access to social information. A writer like Fielding, who can call on the workings of providence to sort out plot conundrums, enjoys a certain advantage over the one who cannot. But this advantage seems rather trivial compared to the greater advantage enjoyed by the God-novelist. The God-novelist can unselfconsciously activate many of the same mental mechanisms associated with religious beliefs, particularly the desire to detect

and punish cheaters. But if that were all there was to it—poetic justice, comeuppance again and again—novels wouldn't be fascinating at all; indeed, they would hardly be novels, but tracts. Whatever advantage God supplies to the novelist, the novelist supplies in return to God in the form of lively characters rendered in delicious detail. Put these two advantages together and the God novel becomes a complex organism, a moral sorting mechanism that offers a measure of challenge, adjustment, and hydraulic suspense in order to distribute social information in the most psychologically fascinating way.

First to McEwen's astonishing novel. *Atonement* is steeped in the history of European fiction. Early on, a man and a woman stand beside a fountain talking about books. It is 1935. Both have just come down from Cambridge. She is wealthy and beautiful and has gotten a marginal third; he is the son of her family's cleaning lady and has gotten a stunning first, the best in his class. Growing up they were best friends, but since going to Cambridge they have grown distant. He thinks their early association embarrasses her; on the few occasions they met at school she found him lumbering and awkward. The summer after graduating she is bored, trapped, anxious, and shiftless in her father's house; he is living with his mother in a cottage on the estate teaching himself about landscape gardening and planning to begin a medical degree. They both studied English literature, and now she is trying to slog her way through *Clarissa.* Here is their conversation:

> Beautiful day, she then said through a sigh.
>
> He was looking at her with amused suspicion. There was something between them, and even she had to acknowledge that a tame remark about the weather sounded perverse.
>
> "How's Clarissa?" He was looking down at his fingers rolling the tobacco.
>
> "Boring."
>
> "We mustn't say so."
>
> "I wish she'd get on with it."
>
> "She does. And it gets better."
>
> They slowed, then stopped so that he could put the finishing touches to her roll-up.
>
> She said, "I'd rather read Fielding any day."
>
> She felt she had said something stupid. Robbie was looking away across the park and the cows towards the oak wood that lined the river valley the wood she had run through that morning. He might be thinking she was talking to him in code, suggestively conveying her taste for the full-blooded and sensual. That was a mistake, of course, and she was discomfited and had no idea how to

put him right. She liked his eyes she thought, the unblended mix of orange and green, made even more granular in sunlight. And she liked the fact that he was so tall. It was an interesting combination in a man, intelligence and sheer bulk. Cecilia had taken the cigarette and he was lighting it for her.

"I know what you mean," he said as they walked the remaining few yards to the fountain. "There's more life in Fielding, but he can be psychologically crude compared to Richardson."

She set down the vase by the uneven steps that rose to the fountain's stone basin. The last thing she wanted was an undergraduate debate on eighteenth-century literature. She didn't think Fielding was crude at all, or that Richardson was a fine psychologist, but she wasn't going to be drawn in, defending, defining, attacking. She was tired of that, and Robbie was tenacious in argument.

Instead she said, "Leon's coming today, did you know?"

"I heard a rumor. That's marvelous."

"He's bringing a friend, this man Paul Marshall."

"The chocolate millionaire. Oh no! And you're giving him flowers!"

She smiled. Was he pretending to be jealous to conceal the fact that he was? She no longer understood him. They had fallen out of touch at Cambridge. It had been too difficult to do anything else. She changed the subject. (McEwen 2002, 25–26)

These two people are in love but they don't know it yet. Thinking that the "something between them" is class discomfort, the woman is aware of her feelings only enough to see that distance makes even a casual remark about the weather "perverse." This is language traveling along a flat road, and "perverse" is merely the crudest measure of the trouble it runs into. Vaulting dimensions of self-knowledge will soon be revealed, although the upshot of all this mental complexity will be nothing more than a quick fuck in the library later that evening. At least since Chaucer and probably long before, authors have used literature to express the terrible pathos of indirection—the comical mismatch between plan, scheme, wish, hope, goal, desire, the labyrinths and hives of culture, and what a young Pakistani friend of mine chastely calls "a little kissing, a little sexing." Why can't we just get it on and drive it home? Sometimes this question takes the form of an ambivalent and brutal animal envy. At other times, it is a comic propensity to see people vectoring randomly against each other like atoms.

McEwen makes this point by reflecting on a writer's technique. Unbeknownst to them, the couple at the fountain is being watched by the woman's younger sister, a thirteen-year-old girl who will grow up to be a prolific and celebrated nov-

elist. The girl has what critics used to call an epiphany, a moment in which "she sensed she could write a scene like the one by the fountain and she could include a hidden observer like herself":

> She could imagine herself hurrying down now to her bedroom, to a clean block of lined paper and her marbled, Bakelite fountain pen. She could see the simple sentences, the accumulating telepathic symbols, unfurling at the nib's end. She could write the scene three times over, from three points of view; her excitement was in the prospect of freedom, of being delivered from the cumbrous struggle between good and bad, heroes and villains. None of these three was bad, nor were they particularly good. She need not judge. There did not have to a moral. She need only show separate minds, as alive as her own, struggling with the idea that other minds were equally alive. It wasn't only wickedness and scheming that made people unhappy, it was confusion and misunderstanding; above all, it was the failure to grasp the simple truth that other people are as real as you. And only in a story could you enter these different minds and show how they had an equal value. That was the only moral a story need have.
>
> Six decades later she would describe how at the age of thirteen she had written her way through a whole history of literature, beginning with stories derived from the European tradition of folk tales, through drama with simple moral intent, to arrive at an impartial psychological realism which she had discovered for herself, one special morning during a heat wave in 1935. She would be well aware of the extent of her self-mythologizing, and she gave her account a self-mocking, or mock-heroic tone. Her fiction was known for its amorality, and like all authors pressed by a repeated question, she felt obliged to produce a story line, a plot of her development that contained the moment when she became recognizably herself. She knew that it was not correct to refer to her dramas in the plural, that her mockery distanced her from the earnest, reflective child, and that it was not the long-ago morning she was recalling so much as her subsequent account of it. It was possible that the contemplation of the crooked finger, the unbearable idea of other minds, and the superiority of stories over plays were thoughts she had had on other days. She also knew that whatever actually happened drew its significance from her published work and would not have been remembered without it. (Ibid., 40–41)

This is a virtuoso performance by a novelist who is at the top of his game and knows it. McEwen stages a moment of stillness before the plot suddenly explodes into a myriad of shards—the remaking before the breaking. There is even what seems to be tacit confirmation of Margaret Doody's magisterial discovery that

novels from ancient times to the present are marked by a set of recurring tropes (Doody 1996, 303–464). The tropes Doody has identified begin with the cut or break that sutures the reader into the narrative; a paradigmatic example is Robert Lovelace's wounding of James Harlowe on the very first page of *Clarissa.* In *Atonement* we will soon get the crucial breaking of a vase. Other tropes include marshes, shores, muddy margins; tomb, cave, or labyrinth; Eros; ekphrasis (a verbal description of a picture); dreams; food; and hovering over the whole fictional world, the presence of a life-giving Goddess whose great imperative is *"tharsei,"* or "be of good cheer" (162). Most of these tropes are massively present in *Atonement* in ways I will not pause here to detail; but could any novelist, in light of Doody's argument, still have the confidence to highlight so many of them? McEwen does.

More confident still is the way the passage I have just quoted enacts the very history of European fiction that it describes. The collection of poststructuralist critical reflections, for example, holds that all texts are licensed by prior textual models and that experience takes shape only through textual repetition. These go along with a high-modernist epiphany. Moving back in time, we find the competition between novel and stage; between "good and bad, heroes and villains"; and further back, we come to the root and branch of the whole thing, "the unbearable idea of other minds." The passage's controlling consciousness is the modernist epiphany: "the moment when she became recognizably herself" surfs along all these like foam on the crest of a wave. (You can see McEwen thinking of Woolf.) Every other problem is subsumed into the one the writer faces: how to establish a point of view.

When the single controlling consciousness pushes into the foreground, the question of Richardson versus Fielding suddenly seems remote and of mere academic interest—just names running across the bottom of a vast landscape like captions. To be sure, these novelists literally provide all the background: McEwen's landscape is one that Fielding himself might have described. Nothing is more Fieldingesque than that scene by the fountain: a poor boy of tainted parentage falls in love with the squire's daughter in the neighboring house. In the spirit of Fielding, too, is the feeling of openness, of there being vast spaces to run around in. Furthermore, McEwen seems aware of the ways in which famous eighteenth-century critics chose Fielding and Richardson as vehicles for their contrasting aesthetic judgments. Coleridge wrote: "How charming, how wholesome, Fielding always is! To take him up after Richardson is like emerging from a sick-room heated by stoves into an open lawn on a breezy day in May" (Coleridge and Raysor 1936, 437). Samuel Johnson took an aversion to Fielding (call-

ing him a blockhead interested only in low life) on the grounds that such morally dubious characters as Tom Jones are highly appealing and tempting subjects for identification, while depraved characters such as Blifil are drawn so realistically that identification may be inevitable (Boswell 2008, 353).

But the names of Richardson and Fielding are meant to be much more than a sprinkling of light allusion or a backdrop of ornamental scenery. For one thing, McEwen's characters use them as important social signals—signals about whether it is okay to have sex. So not only are Richardson's and Fielding's novels full of social information, but the characters in McEwen's novel use them as examples of social information. Social information (is the subset of all information currently available (to a particular agent, about a particular situation) that activates the mental systems that regulate social interaction." The relevant distinction is between "socially neutral information" and "the specific information that activates the social mind inference systems" (Boyer 2001, 152). Some categories of information are inherently socially interesting (anything having to do with sex or hypocrisy); other categories (but many fewer) are inherently socially neutral. Most information, though, is inherently neither neutral nor interesting; it becomes so when one person uses it as a signal for another person. Interestingly, the class of automatically social information typically includes cultural references, which tend to be woven into the very architecture of human social signaling. That is because they "trigger inferences" about education, leisure time, communities of taste, and ultimately class background. I refer to this way of conceiving of cultural references as "cultural capital," recalling French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's ideas about how cultural references become a key tool in the formation of the identity of an elite social class (Bourdieu 1984, 241–58). Cultural capital robustly triggers inferences about what to do next because the matter of other people's tastes is far from neutral.

So McEwen has written a scene in which two characters figure out how and whether to approach each other sexually, peeling away layers of childhood history and class worry to find a roughly symmetrical jumping-off point. Richardson and Fielding are just tools in their game of emotional adjustment. Around them McEwen places the frame of a broader consciousness, a child—the woman's young sister—watching and trying to make sense of what she sees (there are echoes here of *What Maisie Knew*). The way she makes sense of it not only misleads her but also causes intense pain to her sister and her sister's lover. At the end of *Atonement,* the child, now a famous novelist in her seventies, looks back on a lifetime spent trying to atone for the terrible deed she committed after making several mistaken inferences from things she saw that day in 1935, especially that

scene by the fountain (what she did is unimportant from the point of view of this critique; the only thing a reader needs to know is that the young girl made a terrible—perhaps willful—mistake and ruined the couple's lives for a time). What the elderly novelist has come to realize, though, is how morally dubious it was ever to let the one controlling consciousness push its way forward in the first place—how morally dubious it was to let, in other words, the modern novel become modern. She realizes that a modernist aesthetic (1935 is the year of her epiphany) is incompatible with a moral point of view, with "good and bad, heroes and villains," and so on. She realizes this because that all-important scene no longer survives except as she has written it. Since she has woven into it so many layers of memories, drafts, and snippets of other texts, it is impossible ever to find her way back to the scene as it really happened. This is a familiar problem in the postmodern vision of history: history turns out to be irreducibly different from itself. But it sets McEwen's main character a moral dilemma that she never manages to solve. She thinks:

> The problem these fifty-nine years has been this: how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her. There is nothing outside her. In her imagination she has set the limits and the terms. No atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists. It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all. (McEwen 2002, 371)

The moral dilemma she never solves is that her fiction is amoral. Since the moment when her fiction becomes amoral correlates perfectly with the moment when, hidden in the garden, she becomes recognizably herself, becoming recognizably herself means having to face the fact that it is now impossible to atone. I am tempted to moralize about this turn of events—to call it a scandal—and I suspect that is partly McEwen's point. The attempt to write amoral fiction—like the attempt to be amoral—is doomed because human psychology is inevitably moral psychology and because I too am afflicted by human psychology, I am not going to be able to resist the temptation to moralize: even self-recognition means facing the pressure of someone's claims on you.

McEwen's character shows herself to be a morally worried atheist. A morally worried atheist relentlessly asks the following questions: What are the claims of other people? What do we owe other people, in a world in which there is terrible suffering but no final moral accounting? a world in which a novelist's main obligation, claimed for her by modernity, is to establish her point of view? Another

way of putting this worry is the way Sir James Fitzjames Stephen, one of the great Victorian legal philosophers, put it: "Complete moral tolerance is possible only when men have become completely indifferent to each other—that is to say, when society is at an end" (Stephen 1873, 143).

To my mind, this worry—and all the other worries that go along with it—the self in society, atonement, the unbearable pressure of other minds—is why McEwen looks back on Richardson and Fielding from a perspective and aesthetic so apparently remote from their concerns. It is also why he has one of his main characters express a subtle inward preference for Fielding. Because McEwen sees that *Fielding* never had to write stories about a morally worried atheist. *Fielding* never has to grapple with the feeling that "there is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her. There is nothing outside her." God's advantage to Fielding turns out to be rather spectacular—the unwavering hand of providence allows him to write a novel full of the best kind of social information—"good and bad, heroes and villains"—and to approach the problem of evil from a position of relative moral security. To the God novelist, moral anxiety is a version of the sublime: it is an occasion for him or her to lose and then rapidly regain his moral self-confidence. Writing long after the period when British culture centered on a common Christian heritage, however, McEwen does not enjoy such freedom. In London's bright intellectual blaze, few people are nostalgic for that common Christian heritage—except, perhaps occasionally, for the would-be God novelist.

What is a God novel? The term seems wildly misapplied to a novel like *Tom Jones,* whose narrator is famous, among other things, for calling his reader a "reptile" (Fielding 1966, 467). The narrator does so in the course of making an important distinction between the right and wrong kinds of interest to take in his book. If you are a critic, you will be interested in finding faults. Perhaps you will complain about the relationship between the book's parts, or about the fact that you meet versions of the same characters in different guises. You are, in that case, a foul lizard picking over the writer's mistakes. You are a reptile, too, if you indulge in blanket misanthropy, condemning a character out of hand if he happens to have one or two vices. It is much more difficult to be a "friend," to hate the sin while loving the sinner. The narrator wants his readers to reach towards this ideal. To be a friend is to be interested in "human nature"; to be a critic and a reptile is to be obsessed with making distinctions for their own sake.

In another famous passage from the beginning of *Tom Jones*—this one perhaps more obviously Godlike—the narrator compares himself to the keeper of a

"public ordinary at which all people are welcome." The reader, like the paying customer at a pub, has the right to criticize what he is served; the author is obliged, therefore, to publish a menu: "the Provision then which we have here made is no other than Human Nature." As Sarah Mesle, a student in a graduate class on the eighteenth-century novel at Northwestern, pointed out, this is like posting a menu that reads "food." The narrator does not feel the need to be any more specific about what is on tap. He assures us that we can count on him to lead us through the "prodigious variety" of "so extensive a subject" (ibid., 51–52).

But if this is a narrator with godly pretensions, we probably find him embarrassing. "Human nature" has never been a category for scholars to take seriously. The very concept has been exploded—it seems nothing more than an eighteenth-century curiosity whose only effect is to make people uncomfortable, like grandfather in the corner making dirty jokes. Paradoxically, recent advances in the speculative field of evolutionary psychology—a field directly concerned with human nature—will surely confirm scholars in their view that no such category exists. Human nature is not a natural kind; it is a multiplicity of patterns and programs running under pressure from a wide array of constraints. Even when they argue that humans are just as likely as any other animal to exhibit species-typical patterns, evolutionary psychologists can only describe the way those patterns work out in history as dynamic accommodation to the forces of cultural change.

Fielding thinks we are embarrassed, however, because we are temperamentally critical and thus too inclined to specialize. Since the eighteenth century, critical reading practices have grown increasingly distant from the reading practices of lay people. A shorthand way of describing the distance is that critics take an interest in formal questions whereas lay readers have taken an interest in theme, plot, and character. A hierarchy has emerged: the most interesting critical questions address purely formal topics and show how formal techniques are the engine of historical change. Deeply marked as middlebrow, meanwhile, are sentimental stories and uplifting endings: comedy and tragedy alike have become pap for the self-satisfied bourgeoisie. Authentic criticism, on the other hand, concerns itself with system and technique. It is driven by suspicion, by the hope of exposure and debunking. This general distinction is widespread and familiar, but Fielding seems prescient in making it. One of the major achievements of *Tom Jones* turns out to be how accurately Fielding's narrator predicts the way the interests of future critics will diverge from those of ordinary readers.

Suppose we agree to suspend judgment and follow this narrator into the field

of "human nature"; where will we find ourselves? Will we find ourselves in the company of someone who wants to entertain us with stories of poor boys making good, of lovers overcoming family opposition, of the corruption of the extremely rich? Yes, certainly, we will. But we will also find ourselves saddled with a guide who seems uncomfortably obsessed with the darker elements of humanity—hypocrisy and moral failure, mistrust and corruption. If the reader is always in danger of becoming too critical and formalistic, the narrator is always in danger of becoming too much like the Man of the Hill, that mid-novel misanthrope who somberly informs Tom Jones and Partridge that they could save themselves the trouble of traveling through Europe by simply visiting the Venice carnival, "for here they will see at once all which they can discover in the several courts of Europe. The same hypocrisy, the same fraud; in short, the same follies and vices, dressed in different habits." The Man of the Hill goes on: "human nature is everywhere the same, everywhere the object of detestation and scorn" (ibid., 430). Deep misanthropy may be a tempting emotional position, but it is one temptation that Fielding is forceful about needing to reject.

Fielding often has his narrators experimentally adopt the voices of different characters whom they encounter, especially male characters. Typically, the narrator too has to undergo an education in the course of the novel, an education that consists in fitfully trying out a style to see if it suits him. Irony, satire, sarcasm, and bitter invective are always seductive but dangerous options—they are verbal styles associated with such strong men and Amazonian women as the Roasting Squire in *Joseph Andrews* and Squire Western's bellowing political sister in *Tom Jones.* Fielding's narrators are initially drawn to and fascinated by such harsh, dominating voices before eventually deciding to abandon them.

Hypocrisy is even more seductive and tempting than bossy scorn. It is one of the great themes of all of Fielding's narrators, who write about it with a chilling, determined, almost satanic energy. In this respect, they resemble nobody so much as Henry Fielding himself. To read Fielding's scorching pamphlet "An Essay on the Knowledge of the Characters of Men," published in his *Miscellanies* (1743) only a year after *Joseph Andrews,* is to be plunged into a frightening Swiftian world where humans are worse than animals because they are infinitely more cunning. Not only is the world a "vast masquerade," but every smiler wields a knife under his cloak: "a constant, settled, glavering, sneering smile in the countenance, is so far from indicating goodness, that I may be with much confidence depended on as an assurance of the contrary."

A remarkable feature of hypocrisy in Fielding's novels is how completely out

in the open it is. Like Jane Austen, Fielding focuses intensely on cheaters. But unlike Austen, who carefully disguises vile libertines as gallants lying in wait for her mildly sexually curious heroines (think of Wickham or Willoughby), Fielding ham-handedly tells us right from the outset who is likely to be a "Shamela." A typical hypocrite is the squire of false promises in *Joseph Andrews:*

> A Gentleman sat smoking a Pipe at the Door; of whom Adams enquired the Road, and received so courteous and obliging an Answer, accompanied with so smiling a Countenance, that the good Parson, whose Heart was naturally disposed to Love and Affection, began to ask several other Questions; particularly the Name of the Parish, and who was the Owner of a large House whose Front they then had in prospect. The Gentleman answered as obligingly as before; and as to the House, acquainted him it was his own. (Fielding 2001, 221)

The squire has a face that compels love. It is agreeable, friendly, open, calm, welcoming. Parson Adams takes one look at the face and opens his heart. The squire easily discovers what Adams needs, so he says he will supply money, shelter, food, a horse, an annuity. Parson Adams and Joseph Andrews are happy. Everyone is bathed in the glow of good feeling. Soon the squire discovers that his servants have shut up the bedrooms and physicked the horses, thus preventing him from making good on his promises. By the next day, he has apparently skipped town, leaving Adams and Joseph to pay an enormous bill at the inn. They eventually get free of that by the refreshing strategy of not promising to pay the bill, and the proprietor agrees to "score this Reckoning for the Novelty of it." What the squire has done, of course, is simply go for the immediate pay-off, choosing to extend credit without offering anything of substance to back it up. He personifies a number of economic worries in the period, including paper credit and stock trading.

How can we make sense of such openness about hypocrisy, a vice so characteristically furtive? Let me glance briefly at one of Fielding's influential Christian precursors, John Milton. As much as Fielding admired Milton, Milton sets moral problems for him and for other eighteenth-century writers that they are forced to work out in the murky social—rather than the theological—sphere. Hypocrisy is one such problem. In book 3 of *Paradise Lost,* Satan turns himself into a stripling cherub in order to ask the angel Uriel where he can find God's latest creation, man. Uriel guards the sun, and is "held / The sharpest sighted Spirit of all in Heav'n." Satan delivers a long flattering speech praising Uriel and God and expressing the hope that he can be allowed to gaze on humans secretly "or with open admiration." Uriel falls for the ruse, suggesting in his ocular-centric way

that the reason this rather obscure angel is so curious is that he wants to see humans with his own eyes rather than merely hearing about them. Meanwhile, the epic voice editorializes about hypocrisy:

> So spake the false dissembler unperceivd;
> For neither Man nor Angel can discern
> Hypocrisie, the onely evil that walks
> Invisible, except to God alone,
> By his permissive will, through Heav'n and Earth:
> And oft though wisdom wake, suspicion sleeps
> At wisdoms Gate, and to simplicitie
> Resigns her charge, while goodness thinks no ill
> Where no ill seems. (Lines 680–687)

Like Fielding, Milton seems to explain too much. For example, unlike the farsighted Uriel, we already know that Satan is a hypocrite. So it is not true to say that hypocrisy walks "invisible, except to God alone"; we can see it perfectly well. Why, then, does the epic voice so deliberately point out to us something that we have already recognized? Is the point to let us feel smug that we have seen more even than Uriel? No, because in books 1 and 2 we have had our human limitations parsed, dissected, and displayed, especially our visual ones. We are well aware by this point in the poem that we are as blind and puny as gnats next to Satan and the angels. Instead, the point seems to be to make us less anxious about hypocrisy. Milton captures the great fear that accompanies trust, namely, that our defenses will slip and let some hypocrite through. The fear of being taken in causes us to engage in costly emotional scanning. Scanning takes energy and it is always less than perfectly efficient. But being duped is also costly, so we are forced to scan. A catch-22: scanning for hypocrisy is a necessary evil, but it makes us incredibly anxious. What can we do to lessen the anxiety? We can fantasize that even if we cannot detect hypocrisy, God can. God is impossible to fool and will punish hypocrites in time. The epic voice elaborates on this fantasy in two ways. First, it says that, like Satan himself, hypocrisy only walks through the world by God's permissive will. Second, it admits that we are likely to fail at the task of detecting hypocrisy. So we might as well let down our guard and, in all simplicity and goodness, "think no ill where no ill seems."

Is this why Fielding's narrators are so determined to point hypocrisy out to us? To get us to relax and be the sort of person who "thinks no ill where no ill seems"? Although this may be an ideal, in practice (and this is a crucial point) it is impossible to achieve: the only people who can do it are the various avatars of Don

Quixote, like Parson Abraham Adams in Joseph Andrews, who are too absorbed in their own crazy projects to pay too much attention to the people around them. (Uriel himself, though heroic and magnificent, comes close to being just such a comic butt—so obsessed with his keen vision and with his cutting-edge techniques for guarding the sun that he manages to overlook the fact that the Archenemy, Satan, is standing right in front of him.)

These Quixotes are so sweetly naïve as to take everyone they meet at face value. What they have in common is that they refuse to engage in too much, or indeed any, reflection. So, for instance, when Squire Allworthy first discovers the infant Tom in his bed, he is beset by the rantings of the sublimely status-conscious housekeeper Deborah Wilkins ("Faugh, how it stinks. It doth not smell like a Christian"). But Allworthy (had now got one of his fingers into the infant's hand, which by its gentle pressure, seeming to implore his assistance, had certainly out-pleaded the eloquence of Mrs. Deborah, had it been ten times greater than it was" (Fielding 1966, 57). Just as the prototype of the good action is sympathy automatically extended, so the prototype of goodness is the sort of goodness that comes with no reflection. Fielding's narratives are scattered with many such moments—think, for example, of Tom Jones rushing to the aid of the distressed (and appealingly bare-breasted) Mrs. Waters while Ensign Northerton is molesting her.

Despite its appeal, this sort of moment of unreflective sympathy is as far from the center of Fielding's moral universe as are the characters who engage in it. Not that they are far from the moral ideal; rather, they are on the thin tail of a bell curve. At the center of the curve are moments of high reflexivity and highly reflective people. And since high reflexivity correlates perfectly with Machiavellianism, the center of the bell curve features what Martin Battestin calls "a crowded gallery of meretricious and self-interested characters from every rank of society," including Deborah Wilkins, Jenny Jones, Mrs. Seagrim, Mrs. Western, Partridge, Mrs. Honour, and Lady Bellaston (Bloom 1987, 166). But this pattern of emphasis immediately looks paradoxical. The paradox is that the narrator directs the most energy towards reflexivity, but it is against reflexivity that he mounts the most obvious polemic. Fielding excoriates penetration, insight, unmasking, and any special ability to discern the true story beneath the false. In a typically moralizing passage, he writes:

> This is that quick-sighted Penetration, whose Hawk's Eyes no Symptom of Evil can escape; which observes not only upon the Actions, but upon the Words and Looks of Men; and as it proceeds from the Heart of the Observer, so it dives

> into the Heart of the Observed, and there espies Evil, as it were, in the first Embryo; nay sometimes before it can be said to be conceived. An admirable Faculty, if it were infallible; but as this Degree of Perfection is not even claimed by more than one mortal Being, so from the Fallibility of such acute Discernment have arisen many sad Mischiefs and most grievous Heart-akes to Innocence and Virtue. I cannot help therefore regarding this vast Quicksightedness into Evil, as a vicious Excess, and as a very pernicious Evil in itself. And I am the more inclined to this Opinion, as I am afraid it always proceeds from a bad Heart, for the Reasons I have above-mentioned, and for one more, namely, because I never knew it the Property of a good one. (Fielding 1966, 548)

Taken out of context, this passage would seem to be a Miltonic warning: constant scanning is fallible and takes too much energy; it has a tendency to overshoot the mark and thus to create the very evil in the world it purports to find. That makes the context of this warning even more important: a narrator who scans and scans, sorting out the good from the bad while ambivalently (not to say hypocritically) putting his good characters into the blinded position. Squire Allworthy is a case in point. During the courtship between Captain Blifil and Allworthy's sister, Bridget, the lady behaved to her lover "with the highest degree of indifference; so that Mr. Allworthy must have had the insight of the devil (or perhaps some of his worse qualities) to have entertained the least suspicion of what was going forward" (ibid., 81).

The narrator's ambivalence about social information is stunning. Nobody can enter or leave an inn without provoking a tsunami of gossip, usually quite wrong. Rumor, "that many-eyed, many-tongued, many-mouthed, many-eared Monster of Virgil," takes an ordinary dust-up over a woman and morphs it into a heroic quest, relating "the Story of the Quarrel between Jones and the Officer, with her usual Regard to Truth. She had indeed changed the Name of Sophia into that of the Pretender, and had reported, that drinking his Health was the Cause for which Jones was knocked down" (ibid., 395). But however misguided it turns out to be, social information is so much in demand, so prized and delicious, that people who acquire and disseminate it are held in the greatest esteem. One landlady "never willingly suffered anyone to depart from her house without enquiring as much as possible into their names, families and fortunes" (371). Another landlord acquires the reputation of a great politician by asking "particularly of all coachmen, footmen, postboys, and others, into the names of all his guests, what their estate was, and where it lay." He husbands this information so carefully that he "had the character, among all his neighbours, of being a very sagacious fellow.

He was thought to see farther and deeper into things than any man in the parish, the parson himself not excepted." This landlord's great strategy is to let everyone know he has deep information but then to play it all close to the vest. The narrator finds this strategy contemptible: the landlord "generally left his hearers to understand more than he expressed; nay, he commonly gave them a hint, that he knew much more than he thought proper to disclose. This last circumstance alone, may, indeed, very well account for his character of wisdom, since men are strangely inclined to worship what they do not understand. A grand secret, upon which several imposers on mankind have totally relied for the success of their frauds" (513). We soon discover that the narrator is right to be so dismissive: the landlord's spurious insight has led him to the great discovery that the disguised Sophia Western is none other than Bonnie Prince Charlie's heroic lover Jenny Cameron.

All this would be easier to take if the narrator did not employ exactly the same strategy of withholding and contriving at the same time. We know he knows more than he tells us, but is he being discreet or secretive? To make matters worse, he is only marginally less likely than the landlord to be wrong about the information he peddles. After all, the identity of Mrs. Waters is not sorted out until the very end, nor is the identity of Tom Jones's mother. These facts are hidden from us by a deliberate pattern of misinformation generated by the narrator's habit of dipping into the perspectives of his characters and going along for the ride just at the moment when we want him to step outside of those perspectives and take the widest possible view. What, then, distinguishes the narrator (whose fantasy, remember, is to be the host of a public ordinary) from the Machiavellian publican he makes fun of? Or how does he differ from Sophia's gossipy maid, Miss Honour, who whispers a secret about "till it comes to the ears of everyone, except the ignorant person, who pays for the supposed concealing of what is publickly known"? (ibid., 721–22). What, in short, allows the narrator to condemn highly reflective characters while writing a story so rich in the ways of mind reading?

We could turn to experimental psychology. Machiavellianism (the degree to which people are inclined to exploit or cooperate with others in their social group) has recently become highly interesting to psychology researchers. The locus classicus is Richard Christie's *Studies in Machiavellianism*. The Stanford psychologist devised a test for what he called the "high mach" personality—people who may be highly charming and charismatic in social interactions but who tend to exploit other people over time. His test consisted of reformulating statements from Machiavelli's *Prince* in such a way that his subjects could agree or disagree with them. For instance: "Most people forget more easily the death of

their parents than the loss of their property," "It is wise to flatter important people," or "It is safest to assume that all people have a vicious streak and it will come out when they are given a chance" (Christie 1970, 23). In the late 1990s, researchers at the State University of New York at Binghamton designed an experiment that elaborated on this test in fascinating ways. First, they discovered that subjects who scored high on the Mach 4 test wrote fictional stories whose main characters were also rated highly Machiavellian by other subjects. Second, they found that, "judged by their fictional creations," highly Machiavellian people "were rejected as social partners for most relationships, except when their exploitative skills could be directed against members of other groups" (Wilson 1998, 203).

How is this relevant? Is Fielding a classic "high mach" simply projecting his concerns into his novels? Perhaps, but the story is more interesting than that. Fielding's novels, of course, do not straightforwardly project highly Machiavellian characters. (As a troubling counterpoint, think of Patrick Bateman, the main character in Brett Easton Ellis's *American Psycho,* who begins his hellish journey by obliterating the thin line dividing high Machiavellianism from sociopathy.) Rather, the narrator of *Tom Jones* sorts out different levels of exploitation and reflection among his characters in an extremely complicated way. I suggest that the paradox of a highly reflective narrator seeking to contain highly reflective characters follows inevitably from Fielding's Christianity. Fielding is a Christian writer living in a broadly Christian culture trying to make sense of the problem of evil.

Evil repeatedly draws people in because it is so mesmerizing, as Christian writers have always known. For example, there is a wonderful scene at the end of book 1 of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (1596). Red Cross Knight has just slain the dragon, whose massive corpse lies piled on the ground. Out rush the villagers, who were in hiding during the three-day battle, to celebrate and stare in awe at the foe that had been terrorizing them. Some villagers want to touch the dragon, but others notice that its eyes still seem to be moving. As the more enterprising of them estimate the dragon's vast length on the ground, a mother almost faints from fear when her son starts playing with its talons, crying to her "gossips" that the flesh of his tender hand will be torn (canto 12). (I saw a beautiful five-year-old boy wandering around my local bookstore calling out for "one ring to rule them all"—Sauron's evil ring of power from *The Lord of the Rings* cannily repackaged by some corporation as a children's toy. I wondered if he knew what he was asking? Could he really mean it?) For Fielding, Machiavellian reflection is no

child's play. He is soaked in it and fascinated by it; it is as much his medium as the air he breathes.

It would be easy to stop there, to say that Fielding is like that little boy who does not know what he's asking for, to leave this great author entangled like Red Cross Knight in Error's endless train. However, I do not think this argument is quite right. It seems too neatly formulaic, one more piece of propaganda for the death of the author. Furthermore, it undermines the view of many modern writers (like McEwen) that they alone shoulder the burden of too much freedom since they cannot match their predecessors' confidence in a properly morally ordered world. Nor does it really address what McEwen takes to be Fielding's great advantage, namely, that his feeling of stability has an aesthetic payoff. The feeling of stability allows Fielding to project a narrator who can rather unselfconsciously take over God's most important role: a person to whom moral questions are particularly relevant and interesting.

Certain conceptions about God the moralist are relevant to Fielding's project. The first, obviously, is that people conceive of God as a person. Consider a recent finding from cognitive science. Pascal Boyer relates an ingenious experiment performed by some colleagues. The experimenters told people a story and then waited a few hours before having the people repeat it back. Since people cannot remember more than about five lines of text verbatim after one hearing, what they remembered was a general impression of the story. When they repeated it, the researchers listened for variations. Variations show what cognitive inferences people make when they store their impressions of the story. If many people produce the same variations, they probably share a general structure of cognitive inference. As a homely example, people were told a story in which Little Red Riding Hood went to her grandmother' house. Repeating it back, people reported that Little Red Riding Hood had walked to her grandmother's house rather than, say, riding in a little red spaceship. This addition is obviously trivial, but it shows how people filled in gaps in the character's world by grounding the character in the simplest possible way. It would have distracted from the main point of the story to complicate this aspect of it too much, so they simply gave her legs and feet, maybe even little red shoes (Boyer 2001, 88).

In fact, the experimenters had bigger game to catch. They asked people to tell them what God is like. People gave a wide range of descriptions with certain features in common. For example, people said that God has the power to do many different things at one time, unlike humans, who are bound to do things sequentially. People were then given stories in which God is shown to be doing several

things at once, such as helping a man recover from an operation while helping a woman find her purse. However, when the people repeated the story again several hours later, they invariably described God as doing those things in sequence—first one, and then the other. People import specific narrative inferences from their own experience to the story, even though they know, abstractly, that God is capable of doing all of those things at once (ibid., 89). Putting this finding more generally, people seem to have one set of logic centers for abstract ideas and another for what happens as their experience unfolds (88). Another homely example: I might decide I want to save money by eating out less frequently, but if you say to me "Okay then, let's cancel our dinner reservation for tonight," I might balk at giving up the pleasure of a good meal and your company. Or, I might want to write a novel. But the sheer difficulty of sitting down every day for five hours, feeling miserable, and struggling with my unruly tangle of sentences might prove too much for me. This does not invalidate my wish. It does, however, show that the work is the death mask of its conception.

The most ancient and universal experience of God is that he is a moralist, and this experience supersedes all abstract ideas about him. Gods and spirits may be omniscient, but in practice, they are mainly interested in moral questions (ibid., 158). For instance, God may know the temperature of the water in the glass on the dinner table, but what God really cares about is that I have just lied to my dinner companion. God's special interest in morality could be a legacy of Western ethical monotheism, a system that, as Jack Miles beautifully puts it in *God: A Biography,* encourages the "elevation of morality over other goods in human life" as a "tempering of the otherwise unquenchable human appetites for power, wealth, pleasure, and the rest." Miles explains: "All these goods of human life must somehow be gathered into a single perspective and ranked, and moral goodness must be assigned the top rank. Monotheism achieves this result by denying reality to all gods but one and then ascribing to that one god a supreme concern with morality" (Miles 1995, 110). So we could see God as personifying the collective interest, a Leviathan of obligation to whom people are willing to submit on the grounds that the costs of submitting are also shared by everyone else.

However, this scenario reverses cause and effect. The reason God is supremely concerned with morality is that God is supremely concerned with hypocrisy, and God is supremely concerned with hypocrisy because God cares about social information. The most important social information is whether somebody is inclined to cooperate in social exchange or to cheat. God is the best detector of cheaters and is, usually, their final judge. The difference between God and ordinary humans is that in the matter of social information, God has a major advan-

tage. God knows how every thread is woven into the social tapestry, whereas ordinary people are partially blind. Moreover, ordinary people realize that they have imperfect access to social information, and that makes them anxious; hence the high status that accrues to people who seem to have greater access to information than others (Fielding's Machiavellian landlord is a case in point). Thus, Boyer writes, vastly more widespread even than the conception of God as legislator or exemplar is the conception of God as "full access" social agent especially interested in moral questions (Boyer 2001, 164 ff.).

This is roughly the conception that the narrator of *Tom Jones* has about himself—he is a person with full access to social information who is interested in moral questions above all. When he says he will show us human nature, he means that he will deliver a large dose of interesting social information. The question is how to do it. Putting hypocrisy at the center of a high mind-reading novel makes sense for several reasons. First, it generates energy. An analogy: the reason that so many community norms focus on the control of sex and reproduction is that it is easy to get people worked up about these topics. When people care enough about something, they will act on their beliefs. The distribution pattern of norms (with sexual morality at the center) is not random. It is roughly the same with hypocrisy and morality. The pattern of distribution Fielding sets is psychologically correct, since the question of whether other people are cheaters or cooperators is the cornerstone of moral reasoning. Much human reasoning is specifically dedicated to ferreting out cheaters. Very few aspects of social life do not set those massive reasoning systems into motion. Thus, in *Tom Jones,* Fielding may plot an elaborate allegory of the way prudence comes to marry wisdom (as Martin Battestin has suggested), but the narrative energy comes from sex, the vast human quest for status, and hypocrisy. People care about these things most of all.

All of which goes a long way towards illuminating a rather obscure exchange in the conversation I initially quoted from *Atonement:*

> "How's Clarissa?" He was looking down at his fingers rolling the tobacco.
> "Boring."
> "We mustn't say so."
> "I wish she'd get on with it."
> "She does. And it gets better."

The woman is stuck, of course, in the opening third of *Clarissa,* the section that describes Clarissa's imprisonment at Harlowe place and her dawning awareness that conflict with her family is intractable, tragic, and likely to be life-threatening. This opening section is perhaps one of the least inviting portals to a vast fictional

universe in literary history. Reading it is like what I imagine a lobster must feel struggling in the netting of its trap. The trap is set in the opening sentence of the novel when Anna Howe writes to Clarissa: "I am extremely concerned, my dearest friend, for the disturbances that have happened in your family. I know how it must hurt you, to become the subject of public talk." Boom. The trap slams shut. We are stuck in an increasingly claustrophobic world of ever tinier spaces and ever pettier people. And none of the people who lives at Harlowe Place is especially charming, not even Clarissa herself, who comes off as a prudish moralist, no more so than when she sententiously instructs her maid, Betty, of the truth of various proverbs (including, unforgettably, "Better a bare foot than none at all" [vol. 2, letter 18]—nauseating; even so, she does not deserve her fate). The only conceivable way that the novel could "get better" when Clarissa "gets on with it"—escaping from Harlowe Place into the clutches of Lovelace—is that Lovelace is one of the most highly Machiavellian characters in all of English literature.

Fielding is a genius at setting up cheater-detection problems. But the problem of detecting cheaters is only the cornerstone of a vastly complex picture of human moral psychology. Even though hypocrisy cuts to the core of moral psychology, it does not begin to exhaust the kinds of things people reason about. Other sorts of things include the relationship between rules, laws, and norms; the way absolute moral rules can become attenuated in practice; the strange persistence through adulthood of moral realism; and the tendency of moral reasons to apply to in-groups rather than out-groups. Fielding is a genius at staging these kinds of problems, too, and he does so in a way that foregrounds the knotty question of fictional technique. This leads me to the second reason it makes sense to put hypocrisy at the center of a high mind-reading novel. The narrator can parcel out access to social information at differential rates. It is only the instinctively good characters—the Quixotes—who stand in a position of certainty in relationship to social information. For the rest of us, assuming a position of temporary social blindness is just a version of our ordinary experience, thickened up.

In that respect, God novelists give us the best account of our ordinary experience. But what, then, about the agnostic modern novelist? McEwen's worries—about atonement, the unbearable pressure of other minds, point of view, and the whole question of psychological realism—are worries he inherits from an earlier British tradition. Indeed, the stance of the full-access strategic agent is as closely connected to point of view and narrative authority for him as it was for Fielding. Even at a distance of two hundred and fifty years, McEwen can see that Fielding, pre-eminently, is the novelist who pursued the connections between these themes most rigorously. The major difference between them, as McEwen reads it,

is that setting up this problem as a straightforwardly narrative one—setting it up as a problem about blindness and insight—is a great deal harder for him than it was for Fielding. And the reason is that for McEwen's novelist-character in *Atonement*, the only person someone can know—or deceive—with any authority is herself.

# *Gossip and Literary Narratives*

I am going to set forth a paradox to which I am not sure there is a solution. I am interested in setting it out the right way. If I do, I hope that objections to my argument are historical rather than conceptual.

The paradox is this. Literary narratives have been very snobbish about gossip, and the snobbishness is unfair. Even the most casual reader of social fiction recognizes that gossiping is what characters do most passionately. However, they can neither admit to nor be aware of it. Only minor or morally compromised characters are allowed to indulge in its pleasures. Matronly middle-aged women, chatty maids, little girls, and effeminate fops are the ones who gossip. Their more reflective counterparts—the men and women designated as heroes and heroines—only briefly tolerate such idle chatter. Gossip is derided, decried, condemned, and maligned. It is womanish, low, slavish, servantish, silly, pert, loose, wanton, jiggetty, mean. It is the "tittle-tattle of Highbury" in Austen's *Emma,* an activity for the old maid Miss Bates and her even older, blind, and senile mother. In *Middlemarch,* although the world is "apparently a huge whispering-gallery," the greatest gossip of all is Mrs. Cadwallader, a matron with a mind like "phosphorous, biting at everything" (Spacks 1985, 194). In Richardson's *Clarissa,* Lovelace—a man not known for his indifference to social information—airily dismisses gossip as "the female go-round." (In novels, the male equivalents of the "female go-round" tend to be such despised modes of exchange as business letters, gambling, chess, and games of chance.) Gossip has always been a part of charivari: a regular molly-house practice involved men dressing up as women at a gossip's feast and passing around a cloth baby (Turner 2002). Gossip has the power to turn the world upside down. But less comically it has the power to destroy lives *(Les Liasons dangereuses)* and to derail love (when it becomes the "prejudice" of *Pride and Prejudice.*) If it ever innocent, it is only because it is meaningless.

Gossip is all these things, even—especially—when it powers the whole narrative. This paradox is evident almost anywhere we choose to look. Social novelists

view the stuff of direct, unmediated social information as so intense as to require special handling—even disavowal. I will briefly survey examples from French, English, and Russian fiction. The first is a lurid and overheated speech by Henri de Marsay, the peculiar hero of Balzac's short novel *The Girl with the Golden Eyes* (1815). De Marsay is a dissipated aristocrat in love with a mysterious young girl who, he finds out much later, is the sexual slave of de Marsay's long-lost sister. But first, after a night of passion that "had begun with a slow trickle of pleasures and ended in overflowing torrents," de Marsay realizes, when his lover accidentally lets slip the name of his rival, that the person he is competing with is female. The next day he becomes consumed with a bitter plan to kill his faithless lover. He reflects to his friend Paul: "Upon my honor, man is a clown dancing on the edge of a cliff. We're told about the immorality of *Les Liaisons dangereuses,* and some book with the name of a chambermaid. But there is one ghastly, dirty, dreadful, corrupting book that is always open and never closed, the great book of the world—not to mention another book, a thousand times more dangerous, that consists of everything passed on by word of mouth between men or women behind their fans at the ball" (Balzac 1998, 98–99). Even though de Marsay is a corrupt aristocrat, his sentiments are little different from those the narrator expresses in the book's opening chapter, a panoptic survey of Parisian life as a glorious mosaic of infection, rot, and moral disease.

In Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights,* Heathcliff's new tenant, Lockwood, breaks his self-imposed exile from social life by pressing the housekeeper Nellie Dean to do what housekeepers do best and launch into an aggrieved saga about her master's family. He wants her to serve up the gossip hot. "I ate . . . hoping sincerely she would prove a regular gossip, and either rouse me to animation, or lull me to sleep by her talk." When she does not pick up her cue at once, he thinks, despondently, that she may only gossip about her own affairs, "which could not interest me." One turn of the screw, and all epistolary novels look like gossip: two people talk fervently about the doings of a third and a fourth, reporting on the world's shifting shapes and trying to unpack the motives, intentions, feelings, and plans of the people in it.

Authors often use gossip as their framing device. In a way this is formally inevitable: gossip flows into a text the moment a writer chooses frame tales or letters as her narrative vehicle. These forms are pre-eminently conversation overheard. Gossip automatically distances the reader from actions that may be too painful to contemplate. If a writer can complete an action through gossip, he pushes the action deeper into the background. Here is an example from Russian

fiction. Two people meet on a train traveling westward across the countryside. They know each other socially, although the man is much younger and an intellectual while the woman is an old rich widow, cultivated but conventional. The woman's son is also on the train. He is traveling with his regiment to fight in the war against Serbia. His mistress killed herself two months before by throwing herself under the wheels of a train in Moscow. He is now "the notorious one." The intellectual is traveling to visit his brother in the countryside, where he lives with his wife and baby. When the train stops at a rural station, the younger man—driven by curiosity—walks up and down the platform past the compartment of the old woman and her son. The second time he passes, the curtain opens and she hails him. She tells him what happened immediately after the suicide. Her son went galloping off and came back half dead. He went mad and stopped eating. People watched him closely so that he could not kill himself; he had shot himself once already on the woman's account. Finally, an old gambling friend told him about this chance to resume life as a soldier. The old woman hated her son's mistress. The mistress ruined her own marriage and her son's happiness. Here is the way the old woman tells the story:

> "In the evening I had only just gone to my room, when my Mary told me a lady had thrown herself under the train. Something seemed to strike me at once. I knew it was she. The first thing I said was, he was not to be told. But they'd told him already. His coachman was there and saw it all. When I ran into his room, he was beside himself—it was fearful to see him. He didn't say a word, but galloped off there. I don't know to this day what happened there, but he was brought back at death's-door. I shouldn't have known him. Prostration complete, the doctor said. And that was followed almost by madness. Oh, why talk of it!" said the countess with a wave of her hand. "It was an awful time! No, say what you will, she was a bad woman. Why, what is the meaning of such desperate passions? It was all to show herself something out of the way. Well, and that she did do. She brought herself to ruin and two good men—her husband and my unhappy son."
>
> "And what did her husband do?" asked Sergey Ivanovitch.
>
> "He has taken her daughter. Alexey was ready to agree to anything at first. Now it worries him terribly that he should have given his own child away to another man. But he can't take back his word. Karenin came to the funeral. But we tried to prevent his meeting Alexey. For him, for her husband, it was easier, any way. She had set him free. But my poor son was utterly given up to her. He

> had thrown up everything, his career, me, and even then she had no mercy on him, but of set purpose she made his ruin complete. No, say what you will, her very death was the death of a vile woman, of no religious feeling. God forgive me, but I can't help hating the memory of her, when I look at my son's misery!" (*Anna Karenina,* pt. 8, chap. 4)

The old woman ends by saying that the Serbian war has come as a providential blessing. This is a lament worthy of a tragic heroine—a Phaedre or an Antigone—reduced to the bitter bellicose ranting of a rich, narrow-minded widow. But we cannot avoid it. The tragedy has started inexorably to heal, and if we want to slake our curiosity about Anna Karenina's death and Vronsky's response to it we have no choice but to batten onto her words. No gossip, no closure. (Tolstoy is also flattering his reader's discernment, just as George Eliot does at the end of *Middlemarch* when she discretely pulls the curtain over Dorothea and Will Ladislaw's conjunctions, sending everything into the middle and deep distance.)

Literary narratives, in short, are deeply ambivalent about gossip: they depend on it even as they disavow it. In this respect, they are just like the rest of us. Gossip, though everywhere practiced, is everywhere despised. The history of the word reflects the ambivalence. The *gos-* derives from *God,* the *-sip* from *sib,* as in sibling or kin. *Gossip* is an archaic term for *godparent.* It has always denoted an extraordinarily close social bond. The *OED* quotes John Davies's 1612 colonial treatise on why Ireland was never entirely subdued by the English: "The English were forbidden to marry, to foster, to make gossippes with the Irish." In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a gossip became "a person, mostly a woman, of light and trifling character, esp. one who delights in idle talk; a newsmonger, a tattler." In fact, women gossip no more than men do, but gossip's gods are always female—Arachne the spider goddess sitting amidst her web. What work does gossip do? What are the psychic forces behind it?

In *Gossip,* Patricia Spacks traces the history of gossip hatred back to the Middle Ages, although I would imagine she could have traced it back to the beginning of recorded culture had she wanted to. Certain themes emerge again and again, some of which I have already touched on. Gossip is for women. It is idle, frivolous, and vicious. At the same time it is profoundly threatening. It taps into an ancient belief about the magic powers of language to wound or kill (Spacks 1985 31, 11). Moralists have dined out on it for centuries, calling it malicious, treacherous, and terrifying. Predictably, the subaltern classes become the site onto which dominant groups project such "outlaw emotions" as envy, Schadenfreude, pleasure in gossip, betrayal, exaggeration, and so on (Portmann 2000,

188). "At one extreme," Spacks writes, gossip is the less-than-human practice of an Iago: it

> manifests itself as distilled malice. It plays with reputations, circulating truths and half-truths and falsehoods about the activities, sometimes about the motives and feelings, of others. Often it serves serious (possibly unconscious) purposes for the gossipers, whose manipulations of reputation can further political or social ambitions by damaging competitors or enemies, gratify envy and rage by diminishing another, generate an immediately satisfying sense of power, although the talkers acknowledge no such intent. Supplying a powerful weapon in the politics of large groups and small, gossip can effect incalculable harm. Iago typifies the purposefully malicious gossip at his worse, sowing insinuations which generate tragedy. (Spacks 1985, 4)

At the other extreme, gossip is a form of intimacy, even "pastoral." "Serious" gossip, she writes, "takes place in private, at leisure, in the context of trust, usually among no more than two or three people. . . . It provides a resource for the subordinated . . . a crucial means of self-expression, a crucial form of solidarity" (3, 5).

Gossip relentlessly favors some kinds of information over other kinds. Sexual scandal, cheating, sudden windfalls, dramatic successes, spectacular failures, and social climbing all take precedence. Gossip is always concerned with power. It follows in the track of the great and never clings for very long to the down-and-out. People gossip up; Samuel Johnson observed that only the poor have privacy. And in his interesting discussion of Schadenfreude, John Portmann notes that it seems somehow more legitimate to take pleasure in the sufferings of the strong than the weak: "We are unlikely to feel Schadenfreude toward people with little or no self-esteem. Only a cruel or malicious person takes pleasure in the injuries of those who do not like themselves" (Portmann 2000, 48).

Everyone gossips. This was one of the findings of an ingenious set of "gossip experiments" run by the British cognitive psychologist Robin Dunbar and detailed in his book *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language* (1996). Dunbar and his research cadre fanned out over the United Kingdom to eavesdrop on conversations in as wide a range of settings as they could, from corporate boardrooms to academic lunchrooms to pubs, sampling conversations involving individuals from all classes and social backgrounds. What they discovered is that, excepting situations in which it is agreed in advance that conversation will focus on some topic of mutual concern, about two-thirds of casual talk in groups concerns social topics: who is doing what with and to whom, who is in and who is out, who

is up-and-coming, and so on. Moreover, this category of social talk excludes things—politics, religion, sport—that one might have thought belonged to it (Dunbar 1996, 123).

However, even this category of social talk is too general. People's conversations, Dunbar found, were specifically concerned with a few things: managing their own and other people's reputations and the fair allocation of resources. Dunbar argues that gossip serves roughly the same function for humans as grooming does for other primates. It drenches us in pleasure. It helps us form coalitions with others. It helps us keep track of the coalitions people are forming with others. Grooming behavior is adaptive from the perspective of the group, since large stable groups are less vulnerable than small groups to predators, and also from the perspective of the individual, who benefits from a widespread diffusion of social benefits. A plethora of experimental evidence from game theory and other social sciences has shown that cooperating is usually the most fruitful social strategy for an individual to pursue. This emphatically does not mean, however, that total cooperation is the most fruitful strategy: we are always in danger of being taken advantage of by cheaters and free riders. Free riders and cheaters set off a storm of negative feeling not only in the person cheated but also in people who are not being cheated directly. Imagine that you are in a slow-moving line at the bank. If somebody pushes up to the front of your line, you feel justifiably outraged. But if somebody pushes up to the front of the line next to yours, you also feel outraged, *because it is just wrong for people to do that* (the example is Pascal Boyer's) (Boyer 2001, 187). A key function of gossip turns out to be to identify cooperators and cheaters and to advertise their reputations—to make free riding a costlier strategy for others to pursue, to encourage other people to cooperate, and to signal that you are a cooperator. A common social signal is whether somebody is a "good person," rough code for whether they are reliable and can be trusted to uphold their end of a bargain.

Gossip helps us avoid giddy mistakes of trust. Why then does gossip have such a bad reputation? Pascal Boyer, a brilliant cognitive anthropologist of religion, suggests two reasons. The first is that "as much as we want to hear about other people's status and sex and resources, we are reluctant to broadcast such information about ourselves." The second is that "every bit as much as we like gossip, we have to represent ourselves as trustworthy. This is necessary if we want to maintain any stable social interaction, particularly cooperation, with other people. We must be seen as people who will not betray secrets and spread information beyond the circle of our real friends. So our ambivalence does not mean that contempt for gossip is hypocritical" (ibid., 124). Boyer takes us pretty

far into the psychic economy of gossip. We are willing to know information about others that we do not want known about ourselves. We are willing to engage in an activity that we do not want it known that we engage in—even gossiping turns out to be the sort of thing we wouldn't want known about ourselves. Ambivalence, I suspect, has also to do with how individual interests conflict. There is no such thing, finally, as "the interests of the group" or the interests of the corporate agent; this is a fiction we easily grant. Within any group, the interests of two individuals are never fully congruent, and gossip always threatens to explode the precarious fiction that they are.

Spacks tells story after story, drawn from the period when she was writing *Gossip,* about encountering people who had strongly negative reactions to her subject matter. She recalls meeting a famous Washington politician and his wife at a cocktail party. While they agreed with her that political culture thrives on gossip, they both vehemently denied engaging in it themselves. The politician said he heard gossip from his wife, while the wife condemned the practice outright (Spacks 1985, 40–41). These stories would have taken place in the early 1980s. Even though the world is now much more officially tolerant of human diversity, and even though our profession in particular openly celebrates human quirks, gossip still makes people nervous. A personal note on gossip-phobia from an ardent gossip-phile: I recently had the chance to introduce one of my oldest friends to one of my newest. When my old friend came to town, I invited him out to dinner with my new friend. They are both tenured professors of English, both brilliant writers, both lovers of social information, and both passionate observers of the academic scene. I e-mail both of them every day and look forward to their vivid, mordantly funny stories about people I know slightly or whose names I have heard bandied about. I count gossip as one of the great gifts of their friendship—indeed, as one of the great psychic compensations in a profession that demands long stretches of monkish isolation. But when I tried, somewhat tipsily, to thank them for it, they each became embarrassed. I had accidentally exposed them as too interested, and in the case of my male friend, I had probably also impugned his masculinity.

In gossip's defense, there are reasons why it serves as a psychic compensation. For English professors, there are many, many reasons. Just to take one: gossip keeps the information market rather liquid. Most academics have some close relationship to gossip, but it is ambivalent. Very few academics will come right out and admit they like it or do it. But gossip is one of the better market mechanisms that academics have. Academics gossip because they don't make anything. Among the most important goods in academia are reputation, position, charisma, mar-

ketability, and style. But there is no obvious market efficiency in these goods, especially where there is little agreement about what counts as a claim, much less a contribution to knowledge. For some English professors, the critic who has devoted her life to Keats's odes and Shakespeare's sonnets is at the summa of the profession. For others, it is the critic who coined the term *performativity* and writes in a dense philosophical style about the queer body. Each of these critics is highly accomplished, charismatic, and brilliant, but the admirers of one are likely to admire the other only in a lukewarm fashion. Indeed, for the followers of one, the charisma of the other exerts no force and may even be suspect. The drama here may simply be that, because there is no widely shared canon of texts and problems, residents of literature departments are often asked to compare incommensurable claims. Or the drama may be deeper, related to the inexorable logic in our field of what Michel Foucault called "the author-function" or to what Richard Rorty has called our field's sublime indifference to the distinction between opinion and knowledge.

The literary ambivalence, however, is so widespread and intense that it deserves its own analysis. I will risk a general claim: no less a "trope of the novel" than the ones that Margaret Doody has identified—the opening break that sutures readers into the narrative, the imp-god Eros, the muddy shore, ekphrasis—is the trope of the flayed gossip. The flayed gossip comes in many guises, from the benign to the satanic. Her consequence varies, too, from the mere passer of information to the Gordian knot at the center of a plotting conundrum. Her peculiar fate is to be excoriated for engaging in the same practices as everyone else, including the novelist.

Flayed gossips, for example, are the sirens who sing the imprudent but warmhearted Lily Bart along her terrible downward path in Edith Wharton's tragigossip masterpiece *The House of Mirth* (1905). Lily's cousin Grace Stepney is one such. She is a middle-aged spinster and inveterate hater, with nothing better to do, apparently, than collect nuggets of information to use against people at the ripe moment: "Grace Stepney's mind was like a kind of moral fly-paper, to which the buzzing items of gossip were drawn by a fatal attraction, and where they hung fast in the toils of an inexorable memory." Grace Stepney is the one who insinuates to Lily's rich aunt, Mrs. Peniston, that Lily is Gus Trenor's kept mistress; Mrs. Peniston disinherits Lily, and Grace Stepney gets the bulk of the estate.[1] Lily, however, is not completely blameless in the matter. Her mistake is to imagine that Grace has nothing better to do than to admire her, which is a rather unlikely psychological scenario: "Lily would have been surprised to know how many trivial facts concerning herself were lodged in Miss Stepney's head. She was quite aware

that she was of interest to dingy people, but she assumed that there is only one form of dinginess, and that admiration for brilliancy is the natural expression of its inferior state." Lily thinks this not only because she is vain but also because she has mentally classified her cousin as "a Gerty Farish," but "without the saving traits of youth and enthusiasm." Gerty Farish is the spinster-cousin of Lawrence Selden. When Lily thinks about Gerty, it is to imagine that Gerty "admires her blindly" (Wharton 2000, 120)—a terrible miscalculation. Lily's mistake is closely connected to the psychology of gossip. She at once discounts Grace Stepney's own vanity and freezes her in the posture most flattering to herself, little con-sidering that most people do not like to be minor characters in someone else's drama.

There is, memorably, "that horrid little Dabham who does 'Society Notes from the Riviera'" (ibid., 195) and who helpfully spreads the word that Lily and the husband of a friend have spent the night out alone together—a twisting of a half truth that runs utterly to Lily's disadvantage. With his terrible staring eyes and imperviousness to inputs, Dabham could be an allegory of gossip out of Spenser's parade of the seven deadly sins:

> His little eyes were like tentacles thrown out to catch the floating intimations with which, to Selden, the air at moments seemed thick; then again it cleared to its normal emptiness, and he could see nothing in it for the journalist but leisure to note the elegance of the ladies' gowns. Mrs. Dorset's, in particular, challenged all the wealth of Mr. Dabham's vocabulary: it had surprises and subtleties worthy of what he would have called "the literary style." (211)

Then there is the truly malevolent Bertha Dorchester, a jealous socialite who sets first a small and then an enormous trap for Lily. The second more powerful trap comes at a crucial juncture in the narrative, pushing Lily firmly along on her tragic downward path. But long before she does so, Lily gets a warning from her patroness and friend, Judy Trenor. Sitting one morning at Bellomont, the Trenor's country estate, Lily and Judy start gossiping. They have important information to pass, information about whether the handsome but impecunious and fallibly passive Lawrence Selden will be a member of the weekend party. The answer turns on Bertha Dorchester, who was Selden's girlfriend for a while. The affair has ended, she wants him back, and he's lost interest. But in the midst of all this gossip, Judy Trenor plays her trump card, a bone-chilling warning about what Bertha Dorchester is really like:

> "Every one knows you're a thousand times handsomer and cleverer than Bertha; but then you're not nasty. And for always getting what she wants in the long

> run, commend me to a nasty woman." Miss Bart stared in affected reproval. "I thought you were so fond of Bertha." "Oh, I am—it's much safer to be fond of dangerous people." (45)

And dangerous, only a few days later, she turns out to be. Lily Bart has come to Bellomont to pursue Percy Gryce, the stolid heir to two ancient New York fortunes. Percy is boring, wooden, uptight, conventional, and narrowly committed to his uncle's Americana collection, not for any intrinsic interest it possesses, but for the reflected light it throws on the family name. Such an unpromising mate leaves Lily cold, but she cannot quite bring herself to admit how she feels. In deference to Percy Gryce's prudishness, she makes certain strategic sacrifices. She foregoes the pleasures of cards during the evening. She pretends she doesn't smoke. She allows Percy Gryce to bathe in the warm glow of her domestic attentions, to feel "the confused titillation with which the lower organisms welcome the gratification of their needs" (22). She perceives that his "egoism was a thirsty soil, requiring constant nurture from without" (23) and devises the appropriate strategy for feeding it.

Yet Lily unconsciously rebels against such a bleak future. She agrees to accompany Percy to church on Sunday morning but lets the carriage drive away without her. Then she spends the afternoon walking and flirting with Selden, so provokingly that Percy deserts the house party for good. The next day Judy Trenor throws up her hands in exasperation: "All I can say is, Lily, that I can't make you out! . . . You'll never do anything if you're not serious!" (ibid., 750). Lily remonstrates a bit against this judgment but knows it to be true. "Serious" here seems to mean something close to acting and intending all in one direction. Lily faces a problem of practical reasoning, one so severe that Judy "can't make her out." She likes money and fine things, but she can't help liking Selden, who doesn't have any. She has a powerful vision of how suffocating her life with Percy Gryce will be, but she can't quite bring herself to stop thinking of him as her future husband. Lily's ambivalence has a pattern—as one character explains to another: "She works like a slave preparing the ground and sowing her seed; but the day she ought to be reaping the harvest she over-sleeps herself or goes off on a picnic." The character then offers a quick and accurate diagnosis of Lily's plight: "Sometimes" she added, "I think it's just flightiness—and sometimes I think it's because, at heart, she despises the things she's trying for. And it's the difficulty of deciding that makes her such an interesting study" (185).

The difficulty of deciding is what puts people in a plight. Gossip is drawn to a plight. Gossip delights in a plight. But gossip also hates a plight and tries to

flatten it out and push it away. Gossip doesn't care too much for mixed or incoherent motives. Gossip is shallow. But shallowness is good, or it can be. Lily, for example, makes up her mind about Percy Gryce in the blink of an eye. She trusts her hunch, although what she thinks may not in fact be fair: "She knew that Mr. Gryce was of the small chary type most inaccessible to impulses and emotions. He had the kind of character in which prudence is a vice, and good advice the most dangerous nourishment" (ibid., 50). The narrative, slipping from reported third-person interior monologue into free indirect discourse, polishes one of the horns of Lily's dilemma while ignoring the other—her love of finery. Gossip responds to problems in practical reason: Lily has a commitment problem, to which gossip is drawn. But gossip solves the commitment problem for her by maliciously flattening her motives, thus making it impossible for her to have incoherent ones and cutting off her avenues of action. Thus is Bertha Dorset gossip personified.

Why should any of this be a problem? Why mention it at all? The flayed gossip can simply make her way through the eddies of narrative history without our needing to judge her. Surely the flayed gossip is merely an emblem of a rather poignant human situation—perhaps so universally felt that mentioning it is merely banal. We live in a web of opinion and judgment; we constantly evaluate and are evaluated in turn. People have opinions about us that may not correspond to our own. Whether they do or not depends on circumstances that are themselves largely external to how we think about ourselves. In this tangle, gossip serves a rather ambiguous purpose. On the one hand, it is a crucial tool in the arsenal of practical intelligence, a way of making sense of the world and cutting it down to a manageable size. Gossip can be useful when we need to sum things up in a hurry. Where other people come into play, summing things up in a hurry implies a whole architecture of intersubjectivity. It implies a standpoint and an object, an author and the various characters he or she creates. But gossip can never be as true to the complexities of personhood as we would like it to be. It stereotypes and smoothes out wrinkles.

Perhaps prereflectively, people think that there is something literary about this poignant human situation because giving people motives involves making narratives and hence making sense. Consider this interesting analysis by Richard Posner from his recent book on public intellectuals. Posner suggests that

> the public gives more weight to credentials than it should when an academic is opining outside of the area of his expertise. One reason is the tendency to exaggerate the degree to which a given human being is a unity—a single, consis-

> tent self whose behavior follows a predictable pattern. He is good or bad, kind or cruel, wise or foolish, a genius or an intellectual lightweight, and so forth. The tendency is fostered by literature and the other arts, both popular and elite, which tend to depict characters, the fictional counterparts of people, as unities, as types, consistent with Aristotle's thesis in the *Poetics* that fiction shows us what is probable and history what is actual. Most people, including most academics, are confusing mixtures. They are moral and immoral, kind and cruel, smart and stupid—yes, academics are often smart and stupid, and this may not be sufficiently recognized by the laity. (Posner 2001, 50–51)

This is a point Posner makes in passing, but we should consider it. Clearly the tendency of the media to portray academics (or anybody else) as falsely consistent is not "fostered by literature" per se, although it is connected to literature.

I am drawn to two hypotheses—one speculative, one empirical—about the origins of fictional narratives. Both give gossip pride of place, although neither entirely addresses the reasons that fictions so often excoriate gossip and other obvious tropes of social exchange. Nor do they address the myriad problems of practical agency that such fear of gossip raises. But they are good platforms to build on.

The conceptual hypothesis comes from evolutionary literary criticism. Evolutionary literary criticism appeals to me because it is charitable towards the sorts of things humans care about. I thus fully agree with Brian Boyd, whose recent article in the *American Scholar* ruffled a few feathers. His first sentences place theory as it is now practiced in direct opposition to evolutionary thought: "We love stories, and we will continue to love them. But for more than 30 years, as Theory has established itself as 'the new hegemony in literary studies'. . . university literature departments in the English-speaking world have often done their best to stifle this thoroughly human emotion" (Boyd 2006). Like Boyd and many other scholars, I am now strongly inclined to rely on evolutionary thought to guide me through the literary field.

On the question of fiction, evolutionary psychology's intuitions are electrifying. The sheer profusion of narratives in all known human cultures suggests that storytelling is a human universal, that it has a function, and that it is a human necessity. Debate is ongoing about what its function might be. The contours of the debate are roughly these. Is fiction more like cheesecake (pleasurable but not especially functional) or is it like the sextant that guides us across the reaches of a dark and stormy night of the soul? Steven Pinker was one of the first to put this question on the table, raising a host of issues about the purpose and function of

art. Are the arts directly adaptive, indirectly adaptive, or a sort of accidental by-product, like cheesecake?

> Now, if the intellectual faculties could identify the pleasure-giving patterns, purify them, and concentrate them, the brain could stimulate itself without the messiness of electrodes or drugs. It could give itself intense artificial doses of the sights and sounds and smells that ordinarily are given off by healthful environments. We enjoy strawberry cheesecake, but not because we evolved a taste for it. We evolved circuits that gave us trickles of enjoyment from the sweet taste of ripe fruit, the creamy mouth feel of fats and oils from nuts and meat, and the coolness of fresh water. Cheesecake packs a sensual wallop unlike anything in the natural world because it is a brew of mega doses of agreeable stimuli which we concocted for the express purpose of pressing our pleasure buttons. Pornography is another pleasure technology. . . .The arts are a third. (Pinker 1997, 524–25)

Pinker makes the arts sound accidental, as though they were something pleasurable and with no deeper purpose. A group of writers, also with an evolutionary bent, has vocally taken him to task. Joseph Carroll has argued that literary activities are adaptive—meaning that they are targets of natural selection in the human species. What kind of claim is this? A speculative one, of course, as any claims about the adaptive function of human behaviors must be. It is nonetheless a strong claim. Carroll represents a growing number of evolutionary psychologists who are willing to take the view that literature and the arts are not by-products of some other set of functional adaptations but are adaptive in their own right. For an activity to be adaptive, though, and thus a target of natural selection in its own right, it has to be functional. So what is the function of literary or protoliterary activity?

> The function of literature and the other arts is to fashion an imaginative universe in which the forces at work both in the environment and inside human beings are brought into subjectively meaningful relations to one another. That is not the same thing as providing practically useful information or providing an objectively accurate map of the external environment. A subjectively meaningful cognitive map can directly influence motives and values, but more broadly it provides points of reference within which humans can adjust their sense of the relative value and significance of all the emotionally and motivationally significant aspects of their experience. Literature and the other arts are devices of orientation, like compasses, sextants, and sonar, and they are vital to

> personal development, to the integration of individual identities within a cultural order, and to the imaginative adjustment of the individual to the whole larger world in which he or she lives.
>
> Because they have vital adaptive functions, literature and the other arts are themselves motivated as emotionally driven needs. The need to produce and consume imaginative artifacts is as real and distinct a need as hunger, sex, or social interaction. Like all such needs, it bears within itself, as its motivating mechanism, the impetus of desire and the pleasure and satisfaction that attend upon the fulfilling of desire. That kind of fulfillment is not a parasitic by-product of some other form of pleasure, nor merely a means toward the end of fulfilling some other kind of need—sexual, social, or practical. Like all forms of human fulfillment, the need for art can be integrated with other needs in any number of ways. It can be used for sexual display or the gratifications of sexual hunger or social vanity, and it can be used as a medium for social bonding, but it is nonetheless, in itself, a primary and irreducible human need.
> (Carroll 2007, 37)

Does it really matter whether the arts and especially fiction are adaptations or by-products? Whether they are targets of selection or happy accidents? Not really—or at least not until a great deal more empirical evidence can be mustered one way or another. I will be thrilled when Carroll's hypothesis—that the arts are devices to help orient people towards their social environment, to help them make decisions—is validated.

The best book in evolutionary literary criticism thus far (and probably for a long time) is *Comeuppance,* by William Flesch. He believes, as I do, that an interest in fiction evolved to keep track of cheaters, free riders, and other morally costly defectors (Flesch 2007, 67). He also largely sidesteps the adaptationist question in favor of a functionalist account perfectly compatible with the idea that the arts are orienteering devices: "Our interest in narratives will . . . always depend on our emotional recognition of motive and desert among characters" (74). The beauty of this idea is how simple it is, how parsimonious, and how much it explains. The mystery and depth of other people's motivations, and our own reactions to them, lie at the core of literary—and indeed, of much fantasy—experience.

I will offer just one storied and rather bleak example. In 1963, after hearing that the civil rights activist Medgar Evers had been killed, Eudora Welty stayed up all night writing a story about the killing. Told from deep inside the mind of the killer, the story grimly captures the roiling stew of confusion, resentment, hatred,

ambivalence, and sheer muddleheadedness of his motives. The story was soon published in the *New Yorker* and has been widely anthologized. Eudora Welty: "I did write a story the night it happened. I was so upset about this, and I thought: I live down here where this happened and I believe I must know what a person like that felt like—the murderer. There had been so many stories about such a character in the stock manner, written by people who didn't know the South, so I wrote about the murderer intimately—in the first person, which was a very daring thing for me to do" (Krebs 2001). It was indeed daring. The story is spare and intense. She drills inside the mind of an angry racist killer and follows the track of wherever his thoughts lead. I love the story, but I think Welty endows the killer with too much tragic self-awareness and too nobly animates his sentiments. I find that he has too much literary sensibility; his thoughts are too stylized. But these are mere critical quibbles, quibbles about the killer's motivations and how to represent them. The genius writer Eudora Welty made her choices and I, a harmless drudge, find them insufficiently gritty and realistic. I am simply testing my judgment about motives against hers, although I lack the skills to do what she has done. We are both playing on the wide-scale canvass of human motives and their emotionally saturated images.

Simple, parsimonious, and explaining a lot: humanity's rather peculiar devotion to fiction surely tells us a great deal about how our minds work. Why else do we allow ourselves to become absorbed in stories about people we have never met and never will meet if not to get large doses of the delicious social information we crave? Indeed, there is something rather chaste about getting our dose of gossip through fiction: what better way to indulge in gossip than to hear about the doings of people we have no relationship to? Consider this account, by Patricia Spacks, of the "moral comfort" that people can derive from the practice of long-distance gossip. Here Spacks describes what it is like to read the letters of the eighteenth-century belletrist and world-class gossip Horace Walpole:

> He also provides us with a relatively "cost-free" outlet for feelings we might find unacceptable in other contexts. . . . The situation of the reader in relation to Walpole involves at once gossiping with and in effect gossiping about the letters' author. The double role of the reader generates a kind of moral security: we can identify with and enjoy Walpole's sense of superiority to much of humankind, a feeling corresponding to deep narcissistic impulse but one which the laws of civilized behavior encourage us to suppress and deny; at the same time (or at the next moment), we can contemplate Walpole's moral inadequacies as though we had not shared them, and gain pleasure by judging him.

> We vicariously enjoy the position of aristocrat even while condemning its intermittent moral shoddiness: a set of responses parallel to those involved in reading about millionaires in *People.* Part of what we buy in buying letters is the moral comfort implicit in our capacity to make the letter-writer both subject and object of contemplation. (Spacks 1985, 83–84)

Some of the best novel criticism of the last decade has explored the way that the form achieves special cognitive effects precisely through this kind of "cost-free" identification. A strong piece of evidence in favor of the gossip hypothesis is its proximity to several influential arguments from within literary studies (arguments that evolutionary psychologists do not seem to be aware of). I single out one example, the historically detailed and immensely satisfying argument of Catherine Gallagher's book *Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670–1820*. Gallagher argues that when the category of fiction emerged in the eighteenth-century British novel, it offered readers a chance to practice the sorts of emotions they would need to get along in an economy that was shifting from settled landownership to finance capital. "The release into the culture of strongly marked overtly suppositional identities, belonging to nobody and hence temporarily appropriate to anybody . . . should be seen as one among may modes of facilitating property exchange and investment in the period" (Gallagher 1994, 194). Gallagher is more interested in the formal properties of fiction than in its content. She thinks the very act of learning to credit fiction as fiction helped readers to

> reach [a] state of conditional emotional being by inviting [them] to sympathize with characters because they were fictional and then requiring them to cease feeling the transferred emotional upon closing the book because, after all, characters are only fictional. Such a deliberate creation of emotional discontinuity allows for a separate dimension of affective life, one in which emotions were only "practiced," in which the feelings themselves take on the same suppositional, conjectural status as the "nobody" in whom they supposedly originate. (192)

Fiction gives people the chance to practice their emotional connections with other people. Depending on one's political slant, this is an innovation rich in benefits or laden with costs. Gallagher is subtly suspicious of it. She suggests that fiction is an entry point for market control of human consciousness, a development with markedly different consequences for men and for women. For eighteenth-century British men, emotional speculation was training for financial

speculation: "a commercial man is imagined to undergo spells of suppositional self-suspension in order to invest profitably and increase his property" (194). Emotional speculation was good practice for stock jobbing. For women, by contrast, the consequences were more insidious. Eighteenth-century Englishwomen needed to learn how to suppose they could love men (since they could not straightforwardly love them without first having been given encouragement by the men themselves), while at the same time learning to accept that when they married they would have to relinquish their property (194).

A second reason the gossip hypothesis is appealing is that it elides any real distinction between what F. R. Leavis called mass and minority tastes. The Great Tradition of Austen, Eliot, James, and Conrad is just as juicy, in its difficult and ambivalent way, as any dollar dreadful or *chronique scandaleuse.* (Richard Simon has recently [1999] called attention to the way that "trash culture" recycles plots and characters from past high-cultural products for consumer society: Seinfeld from Etheredge, *Friends* from Shakespeare's comedies, *Star Wars* and *Terminator* from *The Faerie Queene.*) No less than popular forms, the Great Tradition is subject to the principle that in an information society, the free circulation of information isn't free; what constrains it is the importance of what people care about.

Although this principle is now an ideological staple of the mass media (we're just giving the people what they want), it struck me with a new force when I first began to teach the eighteenth-century novel. I tried to explain to my students why authors of early novels wrote so passionately and anxiously about form, building ever-larger porticos to their fictions through which a reader has to pass, concentrating as she goes on sorting out the rather obscure and forgettable differences between biography, history, epic, and so on. The paradox was that, for all their breathtaking formal experiments, eighteenth-century writers conserve content with remarkably consistency. Romance, science fiction, scandal, pornography, travel and exploration, realism with a stable point of view and a first- or third-person narrator, gothic, detective fiction, the country house novel—these are all genres that were either invented in the eighteenth century or reinvented by being engrafted onto newer forms. Cycling through all of them are sex—either in its erotic or metaphysical manifestations—commerce, and scandal. But what I have just described does nothing to distinguish novels from the vast wash of social information, of human-interest stories, of news, of advertising.

All this leads into the historical hypothesis. This one, too, is partly right and partly wrong. It comes out of a broad, serious reaction to Ian Watt's *Rise of the Novel.* Watt identified a tradition—Defoe, Fielding, Richardson—and a formal element within that tradition—formal realism—that distinguished it from the

wash of scandal narratives, travel journals, Arabian nights, and amorous tales that proliferated during the early part of the eighteenth century. According to Watt, formal realism is "the premise, or primary convention, that the novel is a full and authentic report of human experience, and therefore under an obligation to satisfy its reader with the particulars of the times and places of their actions, details which are presented through a more largely referential use of language than is common in other literary forms" (Watt 1957, 32). Watt linked the spread of formal realism to the demands of an expanding middle-class reading public, an expansion driven by rising literacy rates, and a Whig urban mercantile class that wanted a sanitized literature to reflect its own increasingly polite values and aspirations.

A generation of scholars has reacted to Watt by trying to break down distinctions between forms, between different media, and between different rhetorical spheres within the same medium. Their reasons have been explicitly revisionist and antiformalist. The notion that formal realism is a distinguishing trait of elevated fiction has come under sustained, withering attack from literary historians. They have starkly rejected the claim that an especially referential use of language or a special sort of particularity is what distinguishes polite art from low. For example, Lennard Davis takes the view that there are tremendous historical and emotional connections between literary narratives and more general-purpose human-interest stories. Davis argues that the British novel arose in the eighteenth century out of a vast undifferentiated primordial soup of news, scandal, and popular writing that he calls the "news/novel matrix" (Davis 1983). The news/novel matrix consisted of ballads and broadsides, travel narratives, satires, songs, and journalism about what was happening in the court and centers of finance.

This popular writing was marked by several characteristics. First was a deep and intentional obfuscation of the line between fact and fiction. Second was an attempt to arouse and titillate the reader sexually by employing various tactics of intimacy, suggestion, and even pornography. Third was an emphasis on scandal, the doings of the great and the powerful. These developments were themselves made possible by new economic and financial conditions. One condition had to do with book production: publishing on a mass scale had become possible. The average consumer of printed fare in late seventeenth-century London was a member of the middle class, a tradesman perhaps, and almost certainly a Puritan. Living in the great rich teeming cosmopolitan town, he would have found himself awash in information. He could read English, Latin, and Greek, because he had been educated at a Puritan school. He would have been involved in various political and religious controversies. He had access to booksellers and printing shops. He could go around to the bookseller, who was also printer and pub-

lisher, and buy various chapbooks or octavo pamphlets for a few pennies at most. Much of what was for sale was not political or religious at all but was satirical or political or erotic, or thinly disguised accounts of scandals at court. According to Davis, the novel claimed to have emerged suddenly triumphant from this tar pit like a whole new species in an effort to make people forget its suspicious lineage (ibid., esp. chaps. 1–3). The novel still bore all the marks of this lineage, but it concealed and integrated them in ever more sophisticated ways. So what Ian Watt called "the triumph of formal realism" marked the novel's successful break with its own low past.

William Warner has taken this line on the origins of the English novel even further. He argues that the tradition of Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding established itself not by gradually forgetting its murky and scandalous origins but by actively suppressing them. Decrying the "fable of origins" on which "two hundred years of novelistic and critical practice has sustained itself," Warner convincingly shows that the novel's self-elevation to a serious genre "has stood in for, and thus helped to efface, a much more plural and complex history of early novel writing" (Warner 1998, 578). Whereas early novelists like Aphra Behn, Delarivière Manley, and Eliza Haywood wrote "disposable books" in response to incessant market demands for novelties, Richardson and Fielding made a bid for their practice as "ethically enlightened" (581). Richardson and Fielding never made it a "fair fight," however.

> Through their novel-writing practice in the 1740's, as well as their polemical critical statements in support of that practice, Richardson and Fielding successfully hegemonize the novel through a series of articulatory moves that reshape what their culture takes the novel to be. First they annul the significant differences between prior instances of novel writing. Thus under the opprobrious terms "romance" and "novel" they include: the artificial, idealistic, and long out of fashion French "grand romance" of Honoré d'Urfé, La Calprenèdre, and Madeleine de Scudéry; the short novel, adapted out of Italian, Spanish and French novella by Aphra Behn in the late Restoration and turned into a formula for popular fiction in the 1720's by Eliza Haywood; and finally the "secret history," adopted from French models by Behn, and practiced with enormous notoriety and scandal by Manley, who was imitated by Haywood and Defoe. Now lumped together in shadowy caricatures, these early novels are often condemned for diametrically opposed reasons: for offering implausibly idealistic accounts of love [what Richardson called "romantic fustian"], or inappropriately literal depictions of sex. What renders these early novels essentially

> equivalent is their tendency to induce mental delusion and moral corruption. (581–82)

Richardson, Fielding, and other practitioners of the "new" or "reformed" novel engaged in the following sanitizing (and "hegemonizing") tactics: they obsessively refer to their texts as "histories" (rather than "secret histories"). They consume and revise the elements of the popular novels so that the elements are all there but are given in a new, more oblique style, and they insist on their own "higher cultural purposes" (584–85). Warner shows in detail how Richardson's *Pamela* overwrites the text of Haywood's *Fantomina* and many other instances of parasitism of the low by the self-designated high.

A point he makes without emphasizing it seems to me entirely crucial. The novel's schemes for self-elevation meant that it had to cleanse and purge its past. Cleansing and purging, specifically, meant making characters less fascinating. All ethical and moral strictures ultimately relate to that problem: the problem of "how readers read" is finally the problem of how readers read other people. Warner puts it this way:

> If the early novels were, in Richetti's words, "machines for producing pleasurable fantasy," the influence of those novels that "merely amuse" comes to be expressed in the reformed novel's obsession with the problem of how readers read. Because his characters are destined for more than fantasmatic identification, Richardson deploys extraordinary vigilance about the way his characters are "consumed": he embeds responses to Pamela and Clarissa within the novels; extends each text long after the basic action is complete, so their story may be haggled out before the reader finishes the text; adds revisions that foreclose false readings, and so on. (Ibid., 583)

In other words, the early novel gets off the ground by announcing that it has become rather gossip-phobic.

This literary historical hypothesis basically denies that social information makes any distinction between the different media that transmit it. Again, this seems to be intuitively plausible. The genius British comedy team of Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders do a skit about gossip. Two women sit around having a conversation, apparently the same one they've had a thousand times before. One woman says to the other: "Do you know who had it all, lost it all, and then won it all back on her own terms?" The answer turns out to be Princess Diana (the skit was obviously rendered moot in 1997), but it can just as easily be someone else (like Jerry Hall). Clearly there is a large class of glamorous, melancholy,

but feisty women—well-known to the readers of *Hello* and *Okay* magazines—who had it all, lost it all, and then won it all back on their own terms. But there is more. Once French and Saunders start describing how whoever it is had it all, lost it all, and then won it all back, they introduce a dark double—"a real bitch, that one"—somebody who does not deserve everything she has got because she is "common" (in the case of Princess Diana it is, almost inevitably, Sarah Ferguson). But any reader of novels can instantly recognize the peculiar blend of moralizing and sympathizing that equally glamorous, plucky, and failed heroines have to contend with. Do you know who had it all, lost it all, and then won it all back on her own terms? Moll Flanders! Clarissa! Scarlett O'Hara!

But all this just takes us right back to the paradox about gossip that I began with. I will grant that there is a certain frisson to be gotten from thinking of Austen, Eliot, and Flaubert getting jiggy in the mosh pit with "cult studs, khmer newts, Langley spooks, techno-geeks, video drones, serial killers, vampire media, alien sperm-suckers and satanic therapists" (to quote from the subtitle of a 1999 book by critic John Leonard). Frisson undeniable, even if repeated priming has made the sensation ever harder to come by (as evidence I cite—not disapprovingly but in sheer amazement at the possibilities—the titles of two panels from the 2001 Modern Language Association convention: "Sex with Aliens" and "Continuous Sodomy"). Robin Dunbar may be right that the "up-market London *Times* and the mass-market UK tabloid *The Sun*" devote roughly the same number of column inches to actual gossip because "most of us would rather hear about the doings of the great and the not-so-good than about the intricacies of economic processes or the march of science" (although it is surely significant that they are both Rupert Murdoch papers) (Dunbar 1996, 6). He may be right that fiction sells so well because people crave knowledge about "the unfolding intimacies of the main characters. . . . The way they handle their experiences . . . their reactions to the vagaries of life—those 'there but for the grace of God go I' situations" (5).

All the same, Richardson especially did not want his writings confused with pornography or with scandal. Even though Davis, Warner, James Turner, and others have carefully traced their lineage back to those other forms, it seems appropriate to insist on the distance between them, too. The fact remains that gossip poses a problem for the novel—a problem that the novel has found itself pointing to over and over again in its modern form. The modern novel has renounced social information of a direct, unmediated kind. But there is a curious logic to a form that repeatedly flays the gossips: in some deep way, it is flaying itself.

# *What's the Matter with Miss Bates?*

One of the great discoveries of cognitive psychology in the last few decades has been that humans exhibit deep, evolved, necessary, but profoundly nonrational cognitive biases, biases that lead us to make all kinds of mistakes when we calculate risks. The most widely studied risks are financial. The astonishing growth of the fields of behavioral economics and behavioral finance has been spurred by large pools of capital hoping to explain why "smart people" are prone to make "dumb money mistakes," as the title of a popular book in the field has it. People are motivated to learn to correct these sorts of biases—to learn, say to stash their cash in index funds—because we are told repeatedly that it is costly not to. We have learned not to be overly regretful about money we have already spent, not to value some dollars less than others, and not to fear losses more than we value gains.

The field of behavioral finance, and its attendant sheaf of popular broadsides, has amounted to a full-scale education in how to reason our way through the capitalist thicket, which is beset with poisonous thorns that we are cognitively disposed to mistake for juicy red berries. Take the example of alternative health remedies. According to the Cornell psychologist Thomas Gilovich, "it has been estimated that Americans spend ten billion dollars per year on quack remedies, including three billion on bogus cancer 'cures' and one billion on worthless AIDS treatments. In the more important currency of lives lost, John Miner of the Los Angeles County District Attorney's office goes so far as to claim that 'quackery kills more people than those who die from all crimes of violence put together'" (Gilovich 1991, 216).

Alternative health remedies are an obvious lure; who wouldn't believe almost any claim in the face of illness and distress? We could multiply examples like this forever. Any time we turn on the news or go to a yoga class or read a stock report from a brokerage house, we are hooked by our need for a good story, so we mostly refrain from investigating whether the underlying facts match up with the story, especially when the information is tagged as secret or special. As Daniel Kahnemann put it in his Nobel laureate address, "People are not accustomed to think-

ing hard, and are often content to trust a plausible judgment that quickly comes to mind." I don't think he meant to insult us. I think he was just talking about the way we navigate our world using rule-of-thumb heuristics. It is no bad thing; it has made some people very rich indeed.

Lying slightly outside the capitalist thicket and garnering somewhat less attention are the sorts of universal or near-universal biases that we can be persuaded to overcome on grounds not of self-interest but of the collective good. These include things like misperceiving random events or badly correlating cause and effect. Though they sound fairly benign, consequences may be severe. If we believe, for example, that shark cartilage can cure cancer, we risk decimating shark populations.

Finally, fully incidental to the capitalist thicket—though not, as it happens, to the social networks that inhabit them—are the sorts of biases that we bring to our interactions with other people. If our mistakes in calculating risks open us up to the predations of used car salesmen and ad agencies, these biases open us up to being exposed by other people as overly full of self regard or overly concerned about our reputations, perhaps inclined to imagine that people agree with us more than they do. Most of these biases come under the heading of *attributional errors*. Attributional errors depend on a divergence between what one person believes about his or her own contribution to a situation and what an objective observer would believe about that contribution. In a nutshell, people overattribute agency to themselves and underattribute agency to other people (or collective forces). An example is the "egocentric bias"—the idea that people have that they are special, unique, or uniquely responsible for some collective outcome. For example, when the class I'm teaching goes badly one day, I might plausibly believe it was all my fault and heap shame on myself. I might not notice that my students were exhausted or simply hadn't done the reading. My egocentric bias here is not necessarily evidence that I am innately selfish but simply that my own point of view is most salient and therefore most relevant to how I perceive things. We simply have greater access to our own point of view than we do to other people's points of view. In our own minds, we are round characters; but we flatten everyone else around us.

These social biases can take many forms, all with different implications. I'll quote a partial list from Wikipedia:

— The Barnum Effect: the tendency to give high accuracy ratings to descriptions of their personality that supposedly are tailored specifically for them, but are in fact vague and general enough to apply to a wide range of people.

— The Egocentric Bias: occurs when people claim more responsibility for themselves for the results of a joint action than an outside observer would.
— The False Consensus Effect: the tendency for people to overestimate the degree to which others agree with them.
— The Fundamental Attribution Error: the tendency for people to over-emphasize personality-based explanations for behaviors observed in others while under-emphasizing the role and power of situational influences on the same behavior.
— The Halo Effect: the tendency for a person's positive or negative traits to "spill over" from one area of their personality to another in others' perceptions of them.
— The Illusion of Asymmetric Insight: people perceive their knowledge of their peers to surpass their peers' knowledge of them.
— Ingroup bias: preferential treatment people give to whom they perceive to be members of their own groups.
— The Lake Wobegon Effect: the human tendency to report flattering beliefs about oneself and believe that one is above average
— Outgroup Homogeneity Bias: individuals see members of their own group as being relatively more varied than members of other groups.
— Projection Bias: the tendency to unconsciously assume that others share the same or similar thoughts, beliefs, values, or positions.
— Self-serving Bias: the tendency to claim more responsibility for successes than failures. It may also manifest itself as a tendency for people to evaluate ambiguous information in a way beneficial to their interests.
— Trait ascription bias: the tendency for people to view themselves as relatively variable in terms of personality, behavior and mood while viewing others as much more predictable.
— Self-fulfilling Prophecy: the tendency to engage in behaviors that elicit results which will (consciously or subconsciously) confirm our beliefs.[1]

This is a long, complicated list, but it has a certain coherence. The egocentric bias and the self-serving bias are obviously of a piece, as are the trait ascription bias and the out-group homogeneity bias. We shade the information we take in about the world towards ours own interests, and we put ourselves at the center of our own drama (although why we should do so adaptively is an interesting question. Why haven't we evolved to see the world as it really is rather than as we would like it to be?)

For my purposes, though, a different question seems in order. Not why do

we have these biases, but what is it like to live among people who do? For that matter, suppose we wove all these biases together—what sort of person would we have? "A perfect mixture of wifely concern and ruthless self-interest," as Emma Thompson writes of Fanny Dashwood in her diary of the film *Sense and Sensibility* (Thompson 1996, 62). (Ang Lee, the director, drily noted that England seems to be a nation of Fannys.) Our Lady of the Many Biases would undoubtedly be morally complex, the sort of person who makes every effort to live in the social world in a way that furthers her own interests but who nonetheless protects her friends. She would be a monster, but an innocent monster because she's just doing what comes naturally. And think how interesting she would be: when we complain about other people at work or in some antagonistic setting, we're usually objecting to the flagrant display of one of the biases on this list. So our innocent self-serving monster is likely to be the sort of person who drives other people a bit crazy. She is sure to be the subject of gossip.

As it happens, we don't need to invent such people because we have a limitless supply given to us by literary authors and their better-paid comrades in the entertainment business. Literary characters exhibit all of these biases in spades—indeed, that appears to be the main reason they exist. As such, they are sitting ducks. They live among us at our pleasure, and the price they pay for the interest we take in what they do is that they never get to live down the biases that the rest of take so lightly in ourselves. We can grow, while they are often condemned to fixity, to having their biases held up for all to see. To return to the Family Dashwood (a veritable trove of bias-ridden individuals): the fate of Fanny Dashwood's husband, the half-brother to Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, is ever to be suspended in the amber glow of his gruesome wife:

> He was not an ill-disposed young man, unless to be rather cold hearted and rather selfish is to be ill-disposed: but he was, in general, well respected; for he conducted himself with propriety in the discharge of his ordinary duties. Had he married a more amiable woman, he might have been made still more respectable than he was:—he might even have been made amiable himself; for he was very young when he married, and very fond of his wife. But Mrs. John Dashwood was a strong caricature of himself;—more narrow-minded and selfish. (Austen 2004, 5)

Small, short-sighted, and easily manipulated, John Dashwood will live forever in ignominy as the man who, when his father implores him on his deathbed to give financial help to his half-sisters, begins by thinking of a gift of £3,000 and ends by thinking that he will help them move their things out of his house if they

should ask him (which they never do). Bildung is no Bildung for John Dashwood, nor indeed for his vile little son, Henry Dashwood, who will be rich someday but will always be fixed in the posture of a noisy and troublesome four-year-old boy who wins his grandfather's inheritance by being inarticulate. Such people are not only ripe for exposure, but they can't fight back against the inevitable scoffer, the moralist, and the person who is quick to notice how badly other people are flawed. Always other people: a nation of Fannys horrified at Fanny, but never at themselves. This is a trick any good satirist knows how to play, and Jane Austen is a great satirist.

The point, though, is to stud these literary characters with social biases. They may be no better than the rest of us at counting their money or calculating risks, but we don't usually mind about that. Yet should they ever exhibit the smallest hint of self-involvement, callowness, selfishness, or blindness to the open secrets of their world, we instantly recoil. Fortunately for us, our world abounds with moralists who stand ready to cut into these biases with a fine surgical scalpel. Samuel Johnson writes bitingly of his friend Richard Savage—whose capacity for self-deception drove him nearly mad—"he contented himself with the applause of men of judgment; and he was somewhat disposed to exclude all those from the character of men of judgment, who did not applaud him. . . . By arts like these, arts which every man practices in some degree, and to which so much of the little tranquility of life is to be ascribed, Savage was always able to live at peace with himself" (Johnson 2000, 73). This is a simple case of an author unmasking the self-serving biases of the character he writes about; what makes it interesting is Johnson's deep, almost pathological ambivalence about his closest friend. He loves him and wants to punish him in equal measure.

Unmasking the biases of hapless characters has long been a popular sport among literary critics. The sport consists in noticing the degree to which an author corrects the misjudgments of his or her characters by creating a normative register against which those judgments are found wanting. Loud is the baying of the self-contented moralists charging like a pack of hounds in full throat after some hapless literary character who makes the mistake of seeming dithery, flighty, unhelpful, or selfish. Louder still has been the celebratory chortling of critical bonhomie when an author is seen visibly to step in to clean up the mess—perhaps armed with a method or, even better, a method based on a theory to corral the wayward character back into the fold.

In that vein, Wayne Booth, in a famous 1961 essay on Jane Austen's *Emma,* can at once castigate Emma for her overbearing pride, castigate Austen for being insufficiently conscious of the need to correct her, and celebrate the fact that if

Austen won't do it, the normative marriage plot will do it for her: "Marriage to an intelligent, amiable, good, and attractive man is the best thing that can happen to this heroine, and the readers who do not experience it as such are, I am convinced, far from knowing what Jane Austen is about—whatever they may say about the 'bitter spinster's' attitude towards marriage" (Booth 1961, 111). What Eve Sedgwick calls the "Girl Being Taught a Lesson" school of criticism does seem to gather up its fullest and most righteous head of steam when one of the literary descendents of Miss Betsy Thoughtless wanders too far into the bright thickets of her own imagination (Lynch 2000, 37). Still, boys and men get spanked too. Tom Jones has come in for a frenzy of providential paddling for being too appetitive, too sexy with his mother, too unconscious of the great Hamlet-inspired ironies that swirl around him.

But I come to praise Wayne Booth, not to castigate him in my turn. The tendency to think of literary characters as if they were real people is a habit lodged deep in the human psyche, and no amount of literary-critical sophistication is likely to cure people of it. (Indeed, Booth has been one of the critics most articulate about the need for "ethical criticism," criticism that addresses itself to our deepest human needs). Jane Austen's nephew, James Edward Austen-Leigh, begins his memoir of her by promising to delineate "that prolific mind whence sprung the Dashwoods and Bennets, the Bertrams and Woodhouses, the Thorpes and Musgroves, who have been admitted as familiar guests to the firesides of so many families, and are known there as individually and intimately as if they were living neighbors." Part of what it means to care about literary characters is to moralize about them, just as we moralize endlessly about each other, a habit that Austen-Leigh indirectly acknowledges by saying that "many may care to know whether the moral rectitude, the correct taste, and the warm affections with which she invested her ideal characters, were really existing in the native source whence those ideas flowed, and were actually exhibited by her in the various relations of life" (Austen-Leigh 2002, 9). If you are smart enough to cloak in formalist costume your very human and understandable interest in moralizing about characters, so much the better. Even so, such an approach is no longer popular, in part because the evaluative style of criticism has gone out of favor, and in part because people have found the high-handed celebration of the "rightness" of this or that ending—what? Let's just say that the French turn in theory put an end to that particular style.

Here's the real problem with moralizing criticism: it amounts to piling on. Literary characters are often designed with cognitive biases that uncannily anticipate the sorts of self-dealing mental habits that the behavioral psychologists

Daniel Kahnemann and Amos Tversky have studied in exhaustive detail. In fact, these cognitive biases seem designed to be unmasked—by, for example, the workings of the plot or the great omniscient narrators of the nineteenth-century realist novel. Yet they are so carefully embedded in a network of capillary-like judgments that to attempt to cut right through them is to risk killing off their blood flow altogether. Literary narratives have their own elaborate and subtle ways of unmasking the cognitive biases they create, and that is what makes them so fascinating. So when the self-dealing biases are evident, unmasking them too quickly is inevitably too much like mocking those who have been brought low. The interplay between bias and moral obsession with bias is the subject of this chapter.

I recently had occasion to read all of Jane Austen's writings from beginning to end, in the order in which she wrote them. Predictably (being at heart a Janeite), I fell truly, madly, deeply in love with her novels all over again. But like all passions, my passion for her novels was somewhat tempered by age, by which I mean my own age. I have grown dark and cynical and unromantic. I am increasingly aware of the depths of human depravity and selfishness. And so I find, is she.

Take *Mansfield Park,* which next to the other novels is an ugly duckling, devastating in its bleak modernity and refusal to let anybody be redeemed. The gap of ten years between 1798, when she wrote *Pride and Prejudice,* and 1809, when she went to work on *Mansfield Park,* a gap during which Claire Tomalin speculates Austen fell into a deep depression, would have seemed a terrible blankness if *Mansfield Park* had been the last of her novels. Rereading it this time, I found the novel dark and troubling, a story variously of the sexual repression and pathological viciousness that underlies the victim character; of how closely the victim character and Christian character are intertwined; of how the stain of an abusive childhood cannot be simply wiped away by wishing. But in my shock, I have grown ever more awestruck by Austen's accomplishments, by the sheer genius with which she hewed and tempered her craft over time.

And so to Jane Austen's *Emma.* Austen did not invent free indirect discourse, nor did she use it systematically for the first time in *Emma.* And yet in *Emma,* she brings the technique to a pitch of perfection, using it to weave a tapestry of biases and then to show us how and under what conditions such biases can be unmasked. She also puts these biases into circulation with respect to the thing they are really about in the first place—status and conflict over the control of resources. Is this too cynical? W. H. Auden did not think so. Here is a chilling stanza from his "Letter to Lord Byron":

> You could not shock her more than she shocks me;
> Beside her Joyce seems innocent as grass.
> It makes me most uncomfortable to see
> An English spinster of the middle class
> Describe the amorous effects of "brass,"
> Reveal so frankly and with such sobriety
> The economic basis of society. (Auden 2007, 81)

Auden is right. The more I read *Emma,* the more I realize how devastating Austen's vision of human psychology is. Her characters are locked in fierce but largely unconscious battle over a small passel of land and all the good things that flow from it. The minds of some of them are fertile tracts, growing strange plants in wild abundance; but even these tracts turn out to be wholly owned subsidiaries of the economic basis of society. So, too, with the grip and hold of social norms. Where do values come from? From the economic basis of society.

Since the fact/value distinction is part of our normal conceptual armature, this is an impossible, uncomfortable way to think. Intellectuals are somewhat used to it—or at least they are used to thinking that they think this way. Actually I don't think anybody really does or can think this way, at least not consistently. It requires too great a suspension of ordinary habits of mind, an asceticism that not even our own skeptical priesthood really practices. I once tried to remonstrate on this point with an intense young professor—a man whose visionary brilliance allowed him to think his way into and out of any problem he wanted but whose domestic life was almost parodically dedicated to bourgeois comforts. Why, I asked him, do some people struggle so hard to define a set of values for himself or herself only to end up with a hand very nearly identical to everyone else's? To his credit, he didn't pretend not to understand the question, nor did he flinch from it. Instead, he owned it and gave his answer from a stubborn commitment to the irreducible dignity of human choice. If there is a best way to do something, then people will converge on it. Like throwing free throws in basketball—there is only one way to do it well. Of course I had expected him to flagellate himself, as I tend to do, with fantasies of being caught in ever more subtle forms of thought-control and ideology—such as, if I move quickly enough, maybe I can catch myself lurking outside the invisible tracks laid down for me by discourse, culture, patriarchy, Fortune 500 companies, and/or an array of repressive state apparatuses. But I never can catch myself. There was I—an obnoxious female Quixote enjoying the lather I could get myself into—and his answer shut me up.

One thing I do know about myself: even though I may very well end up a mediocre spinster dependent on the kindness of others (and dotty over my beautiful niece), I have long since passed the point where I can adopt the winning social strategy of Miss Bates. Even suggesting that somebody so guileless, so defenseless, has a strategy—although we all know she does—is to transgress the code of civility. The code of civility does not take kindly to being torn. It grows back quickly when ruptured—indeed, Miss Bates's social strategy depends on the deep conservatism of stable human communities. Miss Bates, we recall,

> enjoyed a most uncommon degree of popularity for a woman neither young, handsome, rich, nor married. Miss Bates stood in the very worst predicament in the world for having much of the public favour; and she had no intellectual superiority to make atonement to herself, or frighten those who might hate her, into outward respect. She had never boasted either beauty or cleverness. Her youth had passed without distinction, and her middle of life was devoted to the care of a failing mother, and the endeavour to make a small income go as far as possible. And yet she was a happy woman, and a woman whom no one named without good will. It was her own universal good will and contented temper which worked such wonders. She loved every body, was interested in every body's happiness, quick-sighted to every body's merits; thought herself a most fortunate creature, and surrounded with blessings in such an excellent mother and so many good neighbours and friends, and a home that wanted for nothing. The simplicity and cheerfulness of her nature, her contented and grateful spirit, were a recommendation to every body and a mine of felicity to herself. She was a great talker upon little matters, which exactly suited Mr. Woodhouse, full of trivial communications and harmless gossip. (Austen 2003, 22)

To intimate that this happy woman is a social player in the mode of Mr. Elton, Frank Churchill, or Augusta Elton is to risk being called an imaginist. But surely Austen wants us to wonder, just a little, about how Miss Bates has achieved an "uncommon degree of popularity" when she has nothing to offer in return (and no secret horde of psychic capital to console her—"she had no intellectual superiority to make atonement to herself, or frighten those who might hate her, into outward respect" (ibid).

The puzzle of Miss Bates goes deeper, though. At the very outset of the novel whose resolution consists in the Woodhouse property at Hartfield being reabsorbed into the Knightly property at Donwell Abbey (from which it had once been cut as a notch), a happy spinster is an anomaly. In fiction, an anom-

alous person is usually a person facing a plight, but of course the blind Miss Bates doesn't perceive that about herself. Emma, however, does perceive it; part of what it means to be especially insightful is that you are quick to recognize the plights of other people. And if you happen to recognize those plights, especially when they intersect with your own path through life—if you express not so much sympathy as a pained desire not to end up in a similar situation—what does that say about the motives and sources of your insight? When, early on in the novel, Harriet Smith suggests that if Emma follows through on her plan never to marry she may end up like Miss Bates, Emma pedantically explains that she never would because she is too rich. Here is Emma's speech to Harriet:

> Never mind, Harriet, I shall not be a poor old maid; and it is poverty only which makes celibacy contemptible to a generous public! A single woman, with a very narrow income, must be a ridiculous, disagreeable, old maid! the proper sport of boys and girls; but a single woman, of good fortune, is always respectable, and may be as sensible and pleasant as anybody else. And the distinction is not quite so much against the candour and common sense of the world as appears at first; for a very narrow income has a tendency to contract the mind, and sour the temper. Those who can barely live, and who live perforce in a very small, and generally very inferior, society, may well be illiberal and cross. This does not apply, however, to Miss Bates; she is only too good-natured and too silly to suit me; but, in general, she is very much to the taste of everybody, though single and though poor. Poverty certainly has not contracted her mind: I really believe, if she had only a shilling in the world, she would be very likely to give away sixpence of it; and nobody is afraid of her: that is a great charm. (Ibid., 83)

This exchange strikes me as incredibly revealing. Emma invokes the economic basis of society to explain why she, an heiress of £30,000, will never suffer a contracted mind and a sour temper. But how does Miss Bates fit into this scheme? Miss Bates not only has a good nature but is also "very much to the taste of everybody," and what's more, Emma thinks, she would be likely to give away her tiny allotment of cash. Once again, Miss Bates seems to have evaded the narrowing trap set by the cash nexus, whereas Emma is more than happy to boast that a room of one's own and several hundred a year allow a woman a certain freedom to do as she wants. She apparently strikes a blow in favor of female liberty: against "the common sense of the world," I am rich enough that I do not have to marry.

I do not want to criticize Emma, but I find the impulse almost overwhelm-

ing. After all, she spends the first half of the novel refusing the role of heroine in her own story and trying to be an author instead—a matchmaker, a painter, a playwright—all so she can avoid the infamous trap sprung for her between the book's title and its opening two words: Emma. Emma who? Emma Woodhouse. A restless and temporary resolution, of course, since the novel *still* wants to know, Emma who? Whom does Emma love? More importantly, which last name is she going to end up with?[2] Emma's attempts at authorship, like her revolutionary energy (bringing the low-born Harriet Smith into contact with various higher-born men), goes nowhere, of course; and the speech I have just quoted, which takes place rather early on in the book, should tip us off that Emma does not really care about that. When she is pressed to imagine a future, she lets on that her ticket to freedom is not her unfinished paintings but her family's money, which a canny reader could infer was gotten in the slave trade.

In the face of such inequities in wealth, why isn't Miss Bates bitter? She's no trust-fund baby. If she had gotten to stand behind a veil of ignorance and design a society in which she had an equal chance of ending up in any position, would she have chosen one that tolerates vast inequalities of wealth and in which a woman's destiny depends entirely on the hand of economic and physical luck she is dealt at birth? Would she have designed a society in which a woman's only chance to change her station is by marrying, and in which her identity is then subsumed into that of her husband's family? One in which an unmarried woman is either dependent on her family or made to work in the governess trade, which is little better than indentured servitude? Or one in which a woman's reproductive chances diminish markedly after her early twenties, but a landed gentleman in his late thirties is considered a remarkable prize? Probably not—but then she was never given the chance to tweak the system in her favor; so here she stands, assigned a body and a place in a scheme in which her talents and abilities are deeply discounted.

Still, these disadvantages allow Miss Bates to develop her social genius. She does the best she can with a bad hand. Her aggressive and seemingly guileless flattery protects her. She plays her hand so well that she secures patronage from Mr. Knightley, dinner invitations from Mr. Woodhouse and the Perrys, the use of various carriages, and a host of other favors from the fashionable families of Highbury, including, from Mr. Woodhouse, the gift of an entire pork rump. (The only person who seems ambivalent about all this largesse is Emma: "She had had many a hint from Mr. Knightley and some from her own heart, as to her deficiency—but none were equal to counteract the persuasion of its being very

disagreeable,—a waste of time—tiresome women—and all the horror of being in danger of falling in with the second rate and third rate of Highbury, who were calling on them for ever, and therefore she seldom went near them"[ibid., 145]).

In return, Miss Bates allows herself to be a comic butt, and what's worse, she has to thank everybody constantly for their favors—"so very obliged" is her mantra. How painful it must be to be "so very obliged" all the time—or at least so the narrator observes when she is talking about a different character: it is "a great deal better to choose than to be chosen, to excite gratitude than to feel it." Miss Bates has none of these choices—not only no "power of removal" and no "power of refusal" (two abilities Emma herself longs for at different points). She has no power to choose or to excite gratitude. Let me fancifully suggest that underneath all that babble, Miss Bates is secretly, silently suffering. After all, to be utterly dependent, to be always aware that one is a grade below one's patrons—in a society where such things are constantly measured and tacitly acknowledged—is the very antithesis of power and self-esteem. Mr. Knightley, the dominant male on the scene, is very nice about making people not feel dependent on him, but then he is an especially decorous and tactful person. This seems to be just what is required by social norms; Highbury is a place that frowns on excessive boasting and excessive displays. Like Miss Bates, Knightley has carefully adjusted his character to the niche of his circumstances. Had he been born in a different social organization, he might have been more overtly competitive—if, for example, he were a Northwest Coast T. Indian Chieftain, he would have been forced into ever more aggressive displays of gift-giving (e.g., at a potlatch, where, to mark his high status, an Indian chieftain throws food and goods on a fire).

My evidence that Miss Bates suffers more than she lets on is just how obsessed she is with status. Here is just a part of one of her speeches (describing a generous act that Frank Churchill performed for her mother):

> For, would you believe it, Miss Woodhouse, there he is, in the most obliging manner in the world, fastening in the rivet of my mother's spectacles.—The rivet came out, you know, this morning.—So very obliging!—For my mother had no use of her spectacles—could not put them on. And, by the bye, every body ought to have two pair of spectacles; they should indeed. Jane said so. I meant to take them over to John Saunders the first thing I did, but something or other hindered me all the morning; first one thing, then another, there is no saying what, you know. At one time Patty came to say she thought the kitchen chimney wanted sweeping. Oh! said I, Patty do not come with your bad news to me. Here is the rivet of your mistress's spectacles out. Then the baked

> apples came home, Mrs. Wallis sent them by her boy; they are extremely civil and obliging to us, the Wallises, always—I have heard some people say that Mrs. Wallis can be uncivil and give a very rude answer, but we have never known any thing but the greatest attention from them. And it cannot be for the value of our custom now, for what is our consumption of bread, you know? (Ibid., 220)

Miss Bates's voice is an aggressive screen, which blocks as much as it shows. As the narrator puts it once, when Miss Bates is walking in town with Mrs. Weston, "voices approached the shop—or rather one voice and two ladies" (219). The voice swoops and drags, but it always homes back on the problem of what people owe each other. And the problem of what people owe each other is, in turn, closely related to the question of whether they stand socially above or below her, and by precisely how much. In short, Miss Bates, like many a more overtly social-climbing person, has a psyche exquisitely tuned to status. She calibrates her affections accordingly—she is much nicer to Frank Churchill than she is to her servant Patty, for example; and while she is pleased about the way Mrs. Wallis treats her, she is also wary because Mrs. Wallis has no economic motive to be kind. Miss Bates is the Greek chorus of the novel, her words a vent through which its collective unconscious comes bubbling up.

What really is the difference between an economic motive and a psychological one? What does it mean to choose something when there is a vast system around you telling you what and how to choose? What does it mean to choose when your choice is conditioned by the hydraulic pressure of other people's choices? When you are simply part of a species acting out your species-being while believing somehow that your own choices are robust and unconditioned? So many different disciplines from the sacred (theology) to the secular (social economics) have thrived on these questions that we can be forgiven for thinking that they are central to the drama of human agency. Gary Becker, the founder of social economics, quotes a line from a review of one of his early papers: "Economics is all about choice, while sociology is all about why people have no choices" (Becker and Murphy 2000, 22).

Literature often seems to encompass both perspectives, the economic and the sociological, the perspective of individual choice and of people who have no choices. The techniques that writers have invented for expressing both situations at once are literature's way of addressing how we form our preferences. Austen's genius is to blend economic motives almost seamlessly with psychological ones. Compare Austen's vision in *Emma* to Gary Becker's vision of human choice:

> Individuals still "choose" their allocations of resources when social capital is important to their utility and strongly complementary with the demand for particular goods. But . . . choices are seriously constrained, since a person's actions are . . . partly determined by the actions of peers. Each member of a peer group may have little freedom to deviate from what other members are doing because his behavior would be mainly determined by their common culture, norms, and traditions.
>
> When preferences sufficiently differ, everyone can choose whom to associate with. For example, peer preferences of teenagers and adults do not usually conflict, since teenagers want to be friends with other teenagers and adults prefer the company of other adults. Conflicts arise when preferences clash, so that the number of persons who want to join a particular group exceeds the number of places available. Many people want to be friendly with the rich and famous, to marry beautiful women or rich men, and to live near law-abiding and helpful families. But, alas, the number of friends of the rich, spouses of great beauties, or neighbors of good citizens is severely limited. (Ibid., 23)

Suppose you were trying to devise a story to express Becker's thoroughly unsentimental vision of human preferences. You want to shape a world in which "many people want to be friendly with the rich and famous, to marry beautiful women or rich men"—or, I might add, the converse—"and to live near law-abiding and helpful families." But, alas! In literature as in life, "the number of friends of the rich, spouses of great beauties, or neighbors of good citizens is severely limited." And yet your characters—or is it you?—suffer if they tear too mightily at the social fabric as they climb up it. Special scorn is reserved, even at this late date, for especially aggressive female social climbers. Social norms—which are really just signaling devices when preferences differ and information is scarce—regulate how aggressive your characters can be (Posner 2000, 41). In some small worlds, worlds in which people have to interact with one another repeatedly over time, those norms can grow so rigid that they catch at people like a stiff high collar.

The mind of man—so collared, so constrained— is a hive of subtlety. Austen practically trademarks new ways of dissecting it. Her scalpel—free indirect discourse—allows her to handle extremely volatile psychological material. The most volatile material arises when people are put in the vicinity of other people, especially people with whom they have some conflict. A wife complains about her husband in a querulous way; a young man fumes that people do not appreciate him. There is something squalid about hearing everyone else indulge

his or her petty complaints. Usually free indirect discourse is tinged with irony or worse. Authors show that human resentments are a flabby a weapon in our quixotic war of all against all. The Ben Affleck character in the 2002 movie *Changing Lanes* is about two men locked into a murderous cycle of revenge: "Sometimes God just puts two men in a paper bag and says 'let 'er rip.'" Free indirect discourse is what it would sound like if we could put a microphone inside the heads of just one of those men but also register those thoughts in the third person. Most social interactions take place in a small world. We judge, we sum up, we put our version of events around; but so does everyone else, and the irrelevance of our views in the larger scheme of things is pathetic.

The village of Highbury is Austen's version of God's paper bag—a small world into which she drops her characters, giving them no way out, and then watching as they sort out resources among themselves. That they do so in a mostly civil fashion is part of the novel's pleasure—we get to experience the vicarious frisson that comes from aggression deferred into comic play. At the risk of sounding too mechanical, the novel is a sophisticated hydraulic system for producing a guided distribution of resources. And human psychology is what makes the resource division all come out right in the end.

Human psychology, resource distribution, and the problem of living in a small world are all intimately connected: they form an axis around which facts and values rotate and converge. The problem of the small world comes up most forcefully during a conversation between Emma and Frank Churchill in which they discuss the problem of how to hold a dance at Mr. and Mrs. Weston's house. Emma and Frank have different motivations for wanting a dance—Emma's turns out to be somewhat vain, while Frank's, typically, is utterly secretive. He wants to dance with his beloved—Emma believes that person to be herself, whereas we later discover that, of course, it is Jane Fairfax; Emma, meanwhile, wants to show everyone what a handsome couple she and Frank Churchill make (in an important moment of free indirect discourse, Emma thinks "they were a couple worth looking at." Emma also wants to compete with Jane Fairfax in a contest she thinks she can win—dancing. But there are problems; the room at Randalls is too small to accommodate all the couples that would have to be invited—a problem that strikes Emma much more forcefully than it does Frank Churchill.

Emma's ambivalence about "a crowd in a little room" is significant. The very phrase expresses some of the deepest moral, philosophical, and social concerns of Austen's novel. For Austen's characters, life in the small village of Highbury is very much like being a crowd in a little room, and from this social situation many of the moral and psychological facts about these characters follow. For example,

Emma laments that, after her failed matchmaking attempt with Harriet and Mr. Elton, the three of them are going to have to circulate in the same social world over and over again: they have no "power of removal"; "they must encounter each other and make the best of it" (Austen 2003, 135).

The phrase also describes the way most human beings throughout history have lived and continue to live. Sudden, constant mobility is a phenomenon of industrialization only. What would be the psychological effects of living in a crowd in a little room? It is sometimes fun to run it as a thought experiment, say, when waiting for a flight in an airport lounge: what would happen to everyone if the doors suddenly shut for the next hundred years and the group's collective resource profile was sufficient for survival but depended on exchanging goods? The first thing that would happen is that cliques would form and dominance hierarchies would become the norm—social organization would go vertical. But this doesn't mean that the feel of the place would be brutal. Why does it feel as if people are so much ruder in a large city than they are in a small town? Why does "small town" America stand metonymically for the all that is positive in the minds of the family-values politicians? For the simple reason that if you encounter the same people over and over again you have an incredible incentive to be known as trustworthy—reputation becomes the single most important currency that you can have; rudeness is a privilege reserved for those whom will never see you again. A corollary to this is that the skill of being able to read people correctly becomes more prized. Why? To be sure that other people are trustworthy.

In *Emma,* status hierarchies are closely connected to the theme of blindness and insight—and this is the theme to which free indirect discourse hews most closely. Consider: with two prominent exceptions, free indirect discourse in the novel is a matter of Emma's quasi-mistaken viewpoint. (I will touch on the exceptions in a moment.) Specifically, free indirect discourse expresses Emma's feeling that she is superior to somebody else, a viewpoint that both is and is not correct. Here is Emma on Highbury: "Highbury, the large and populous village almost amounting to a town, to which Hartfield, in spite of its separate lawn and shrubberies and name, did really belong, afforded her no equals." An important subtheme is Emma's feelings of rivalry towards other women. Emma on Augusta Elton (a social climber who resembles nobody so much as Emma herself):

> that Mrs. Elton was a vain woman, extremely well satisfied with herself, and thinking much of her own importance; that she meant to shine and be very superior, but with manners which had been formed in a bad school, pert and familiar; that all her notions were drawn from one set of people, and one style of living; that if not foolish she was ignorant, and that her society would certainly

> do Mr. Elton no good. Harriet would have been a better match. If not wise or refined herself, she would have connected him with those who were; but Miss Hawkins, it might be fairly supposed from her easy conceit, had been the best of her own set. The rich brother-in-law near Bristol was the pride of the alliance, and his place and his carriages were the pride of him. (Ibid., 253)

Emma on Jane Fairfax, the beautiful governess whom she may subconsciously perceive to be her rival for Frank Churchill: "She was, besides, which was the worst of all, so cold, so cautious! There was no getting at her real opinion. Wrapt up in a cloak of politeness, she seemed determined to hazard nothing. She was disgustingly, was suspiciously reserved." And in an example that combines status with rivalry (or in this case its containment), Emma thinks about Harriet Smith after first meeting her:

> Encouragement should be given. Those soft blue eyes and all those natural graces should not be wasted on the inferior society of Highbury and its connections. The acquaintance she had already formed were unworthy of her. The friends from whom she had just parted, though very good sort of people, must be doing her harm. (24)

The novel wants us to consider how reliable Emma's feelings are. The examples I've just cited could be ironic, as when Austen immediately undercuts the objective-seeming first sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* ("It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife") by showing in the second sentence ("However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters") that reality is just a collective hunch. However, like Don Quixote—a character on whom she is partly modeled—Emma is never completely wrong: Augusta Elton is a social-climbing snob, Jane Fairfax is cold and cautious, and she and Frank Churchill do make a handsome couple.

Emma's errors of observation are closely connected to Knightley's observational powers. The novel prizes insight, a quality the Knightley brothers have in abundance (thinks Emma: "There was no denying that those brothers had penetration"—a word Austen plays on obsessively). The highest power is being able to read other people correctly; this power, of course, Emma lacks until the very end of the novel, when she starts talking obsessively about how "blind" she has been. Meanwhile, Knightley is the silent watcher, the omniscient observer who sees everything from his "superior" position (another word Austen plays on

obsessively) but who gallantly refuses to use the insights he has gained to show people up. The power to read people correctly consists in not using knowledge to dominate or control them.

Not only can't Emma see into people's hearts very well, but even when she does manage to read someone correctly she scans for the signs of weakness that she can use to dominate rather than to empathize. But this is not simply Knightley's correcting perspective, revealed as a coup de foudre after Emma's attack on Miss Bates at Box Hill. It is also the perspective of the group. Emma's satirical judgment on Mrs. Elton, for example, is corrected a few pages later by the much more benign and general judgment of the citizens of Highbury:

> There was no reason to suppose Mr. Elton thought at all differently from his wife. He seemed not merely happy with her, but proud. He had the air of congratulating himself on having brought such a woman to Highbury, as not even Miss Woodhouse could equal; and the greater part of her new acquaintance, disposed to commend, or not in the habit of judging, following the lead of Miss Bates's good-will or taking it for granted that the bride must be as clever and as agreeable as she professed herself, were very well satisfied; so that Mrs. Elton's praise passed from one mouth to another as it ought to do, unimpeded by Miss Woodhouse, who readily continued her first contribution and talked with a good grace of her being "very pleasant and very elegantly dressed." (Ibid., 231)

Whose judgment is more accurate, Emma's or that of the group? The collective judgment looks like a straightforward case of social norms exerting their collaring pressure. The general citizenry wants to keep the peace and so tends to think well of everyone. In developing her strategy, Miss Bates simply imitates the general will: she never has a bad word to say about another person because it wouldn't be in her interests to do so. Satire, the eye of judgment, is a way of making distinctions—and it is in the interests of social harmony that such distinctions not be recorded—even if that means involving people in a kind of willed blindness. Miss Bates is the most willingly blind of all—or the most willingly self-policed. Her powers of insight fall somewhere between the complete blindness of old Mrs. Bates and Mr. Woodhouse and the high "penetration" of Mr. Knightley. She has shaped her powers so that they perfectly match those of Highbury society in general—which has a large investment in keeping the peace by seeing the best in everyone, even people who are demonstrably monstrous. In the face of the group, Emma must police herself, politely forbearing to express her opinion in order to avoid offending the general will. Self-policing is a matter of learning to think well of people, of internalizing the most bourgeois of social norms (send

thank you notes; if you can't find anything nice to say, don't say anything at all; etc.) and swearing off the pleasures of negative gossip so as not to puncture this normative perspective.

All this suggests a paradox about free indirect discourse. The thoughts we see the characters having through this mechanism, though apparently of great insight into other people, turn out to be spurious because they are connected to the babble of resentment and to emotional dominance. Free indirect discourse is just too negative. So, for instance, the one point on which Knightley's perspective is fallible is Frank Churchill. The only time something approaching free indirect discourse appears in the novel unconnected to Emma's perspective is when Knightley reflects on Frank Churchill. It is another ambiguous example because Knightley both is and is not correct in his perceptions:

> Mr. Knightley, who, for some reason best known to himself, had certainly taken an early dislike to Frank Churchill, was only growing to dislike him more. He began to suspect him of some double dealing in his pursuit of Emma. That Emma was his object appeared indisputable. Every thing declared it; his own attentions, his father's hints, his mother-in-law's guarded silence; it was all in unison; words, conduct, discretion, and indiscretion, told the same story. But while so many were devoting him to Emma, and Emma herself making him over to Harriet, Mr. Knightley began to suspect him of some inclination to trifle with Jane Fairfax. He could not understand it; but there were symptoms of intelligence between them—he thought so at least—symptoms of admiration on his side, which, having once observed, he could not persuade himself to think entirely void of meaning, however he might wish to escape any of Emma's errors of imagination. She was not present when the suspicion first arose. He was dining with the Randalls' family, and Jane, at the Eltons'; and he had seen a look, more than a single look, at Miss Fairfax, which, from the admirer of Miss Woodhouse, seemed somewhat out of place. (Ibid., 322)

Just as Knightley is and is not correct about Frank Churchill, this passage is and is not free indirect discourse—it shifts rapidly between narrated monologue and ordinary third-person narration, at once entering into Knightley's perspective and standing outside of it. So, too, does Knightley both enter into and stand outside the perspectives of the other people in his group. Although in this case free indirect discourse allows Knightley to guess Frank Churchill's secret before anybody else does, his jealous thoughts are eventually corrected in the proposal scene, when he describes Frank as a "very good sort of fellow."

Some of the most interesting recent criticism of the novel has focused on how

social norms catch at the characters. There is Frances Ferguson's conceptual blockbuster "Emma and the Impact of Form" and a brilliant, if richly Foucauldian, article by Casey Finch and Peter Bowen on gossip and free indirect style. Finch and Bowen's piece is very much of its place and time (it was published in *Representations* in 1990), but sweetly so. Its thesis is that gossip is a mechanism of social control, the means of effecting the "supreme ideological triumph when political constructions are naturalized and therefore rendered invisible as such: the vicissitudes of the plot reach shimmering resolution; the characters are properly aligned along undamaged social hierarchies; the economic imperative is brought to bear on the very structure of desire" (Finch and Bowen 1990, 2). The hallmark of ideology is that it is invisible—authority, like God, is everywhere and nowhere (they quote the following from the novel: "Somebody said . . . ," "Somebody else believed . . . ," "There was a strange rumour in Highbury . . . " (8). That the workings of ideology are invisible leads to a raft of exciting paradoxes, one paradox being that the only source of gossip seems to be gossipy women; gossipy women thus turn out to be the innocent-looking agents behind the all-powerful invisible hand. This leads to the further, almost delicious, paradox of false-consciousness: women enforce social norms that mainly serve the interests of the landed patriarchy. These familiar arguments occasion a beautiful reading of gossip in the novel. I think of them simply as a way of getting people to care about the reading itself—the price of aesthetic admission. This reading centers on "the civic drama of suspicious glances, mysterious gifts, and annoying newcomers" (8)—all the things we want to know about. Free indirect style is the star of the show, the mechanism through which personal and collective values are sorted out and aligned. It is subjective and objective, private and public.

Yet despite the slight air of Foucauldian paranoia that pervades Finch and Bowen's piece, none of this is mysterious. Social control is hardly something imposed from above, whatever that would even mean. Austen presents a completely realistic picture of what happens to a small group of people interacting with one another over time. The group tends to become stable—not because stability benefits the group as a whole but because it benefits individuals to choose long-term stability over short-term gain. To be sure, a person can choose to take the short-term pleasure and forget about the long-term benefits, but she will be forcefully presented with reasons why she should not—not because of some mysterious force of culture but because it is in everyone's narrow interest to enforce the contract. Emma's self-suspension is just rationally self-interested economic behavior. There is no mystery about the spread of free indirect discourse any more than there is about the rise of the novel. *Emma* is a high mind-reading novel

because it describes a system of resource allocation that requires intense mental dexterity to navigate.

But that is not to say that *Emma* poses no mysteries. Why are negative thoughts so pleasurable that indulging in them counts as a form of selfishness? Why are nice thoughts the default perspective demanded by the stable group? Why is it that a marriageable young woman needs to be made over to conform to the moral occasion? (Another way of asking this is, Why are women supposed to be altruists?) And the final question—unsolved by those who posit mysterious "forces of culture"—is how those negative thoughts are controlled.

The answer is that they aren't—they are merely contained. Rereading all of Austen's novels through in the order in which she published them has shown me how obsessive she is, using the same devices and the same plot points, the same instruments to play the same emotional symphony over and over again—but with increasing skill and subtlety as the years go by. For instance, Mr. Collins of *Pride and Prejudice* and Mr. Elton of *Emma* are structurally the same character—the vicar whose proposal is turned down early and who goes on to marry somebody comically unsuitable. And then there is the cad, a figure who evolves from the melodramatic rake Willoughby, with his dark confessional night of the soul, to Elinor Dashwood, through Walter Elliot. The cad character becomes infinitely more subtle over time, with Frank Churchill representing perhaps the subtlest instantiation of it. He is neither damned by his own conscience as Willoughby is, nor is he punished by being made to marry a woman he hates, as is Wickham; he is simply made to seem young, flighty, insouciant, and careless—just about the worst thing you can be when you are going up against a Mr. Knightley.

Speaking of cads, the *New York Times* ran an article in 2006 about an online dating website called www.dontdatehimgirl.com. On this website, women can publish brief narratives of the men who have done them wrong—by, for instance, concealing that they are married in their online dating profiles. Men are allowed to write rebuttals but not to remove the posts. The postings are pathetic: one hapless fellow, according to his embittered ex-girlfriend, "has a heart condition and has decided that before he goes he's going to see just how many women he can lay." Another "has horrible grammar and is obsessed with Superman. He is originally from Iowa"(Alvarez 2006). Just think how much heartache could have been saved if Georgiana Darcy, in defiance of her brother's wish for secrecy, had managed to post a short squib about George Wickham. It might sound like this: "To induce me elope with him from Ramsgate, this handsome fellow, the son of my father's steward, fell in league with a Mrs. Younge, who was my chaperone but who turned out to be little better than a procuress. Had it not been for my

brother, who showed up a day or so before we were due to depart, Mr. Wickham would undoubtedly now be in possession of my fortune of thirty thousand pounds and of my hand." But even had such a website existed, allowing her heroines to avoid much pain and vexation of mind, Jane Austen would have found ways to plunge up to the hilt into her great human theme, the standing arms race between men and women over issues of trust and mate fitness, with all the unspoken worries about virgin and whore constraining the men and worries about fears of being used and abandoned constraining the women.

Austen's greatest obsession—even greater than cads versus dads—is the way people scan their social world for status distinctions, often to within a hair's breadth of accuracy. Austen's interest in this abiding human concern is of course comic, but the concern itself is serious and unpleasant, often taking possession of entire minds and turning them into stuttering engines of contempt, jealousy, and anxiety, engines so powerful, indeed, that they can infect even the narrative with their angst. The last paragraph of *Emma,* so affirming of the metaphysical power of love to heal all vexations, is marred by Augusta Elton's all-encompassing search for signs of weakness in her rival Emma:

> The wedding was very much like other weddings, where the parties have no taste for finery or parade; and Mrs. Elton, from the particulars detailed by her husband, thought it all extremely shabby, and very inferior to her own. "Very little white satin, very few lace veils; a most pitiful business! Selina would stare when she heard of it." But, in spite of these deficiencies, the wishes, the hopes, the confidence, the predictions of the small band of true friends who witnessed the ceremony, were fully answered in the perfect happiness of the union.
> (Austen 2003, 453)

Augusta Elton's relentless war for superiority is exactly what love has to overcome. The word deficiencies in the last sentence reminds me of the way, at the very end of Milton's great epic poem *Paradise Lost,* when Adam and Eve are finally walking out of paradise, Satan makes a brief and subtle reappearance in a beautiful metaphor about the mist rising up around the laborer's foot as he heads home in the evening (a metaphor that recalls God's curse against the serpent, that he will always bruise our heel and that we will always bruise his head). Augusta Elton, with her sense of the "deficiencies" of other people's lives, is like Satan—always subtly present among us and able to be conquered, not by our own moral policing, but only by the firmness of love.

# *Mind Blindness*

> I had made the discovery that if you put people in a comic light they became more likable—if you spoke of someone as a gross, belching, wall-eyed human pike you got along much better with him thereafter, partly because you were aware that you were the sadist who took away his human attributes. Also, having done him some metaphorical violence, you owed him special consideration.
>
> —*Saul Bellow, Ravelstein*

Eighteenth-century satire is alive and well and gnawing at the edges of a transatlantic English-speaking culture. Its health was paradoxically confirmed by the death, in January 2001, of Auberon Waugh, scabrous and vitriolic denizen of Fleet Street, whose passing provoked scandalized cries of "Swiftian" from obituary writers on the right and the left. *Guardian* columnist Polly Toynbee claimed she was only giving as good as she had gotten when she condemned the writer this way:

> The world of Auberon Waugh is a coterie of reactionary fogeys centred on the *Spectator* and the *Telegraph* who affect an imaginary style of 1930's gent—Evelyn was the icon. Battered brown trilby, chalk-stripes, sit-up-and-beg bike with a basket full of books from the London Library are the accoutrements. The mind-set is all Evelyn Waugh too—the smells and bells of aristocracy and old Catholicism (recusant priest-holers only—God forbid any happy clappy stuff). Effete, drunken, snobbish, sneering, racist and sexist, they spit poison at anyone vulgar enough to want to improve anything at all. Liberalism is the archenemy—Shirley Williams was Waugh's bete noire. While do-nothing conservatism is their mode, they enjoy extremism of any complexion and excoriate the dreary toil of incremental improvement—boring, sincere and social

> workerish. The worst thing is "doing good". Their snobbery is of a vulgarity beyond belief - yahoos capering in genteel suits." (Toynbee 2001)

Auberon Waugh would have found this delightful. He certainly relished any attention, and the less flattering the better. His style was penetrating and deflationary, as much towards his own bullet-torn carcass and dipsomaniacal friends as towards anyone else. Perhaps his deflationary stance was therapeutic. After all, it cannot be worse to be posthumously described as a yahoo capering in a genteel suit than to be dismissed by one's famous father as "a great bore" at the age of six or as "clumsy and disheveled, sly, without intellectual, aesthetic or spiritual interest" at the age of seven (Waugh 1998, 37, 7).

Polly Toynbee stokes satire's reputation as a reactionary tool in the hands of gloomy Tories, those disgruntled elites who dislike the visible and rapid pace of change around them. But satire is just as likely to be a tool of democratization. For satire to flourish several conditions must be in place, including relative freedom from censorship and retaliation. Global communication is now instantaneous and low cost: for every propagandistic assertion, no matter how mild, the Internet allows for the speedy mass distribution of a response. Satire has always thrived on exposing pretense and grandiosity, comforting the afflicted, and afflicting the comfortable. Now information and images can be transmitted at the same time as the claims of the spin-doctors.

Politics seems to bring the satirists out in force. In the immediate aftermath of the contested 2000 presidential election, for example, the Internet was host to hundreds of occasional satires. One of the most classically eighteenth-century examples (recalling the famous caricature of the poet Alexander Pope as an A. P——E, half monkey half human) is "Curious George" (fig. 2). "Curious George" is an eighteenth-century satire in several respects. First, it plays on the connection between humans and animals, a connection no less fraught with terror in the eighteenth century than in our own confusing post-Darwinian moment. Eighteenth-century Britons compared humans to animals with an obsessive frequency, upending for comic effect the metaphysical picture associated with the Great Chain of Being, in which humans are higher than animals and thus closer to God, reason, and the angels; animals are lower and driven by instincts, their actions and motives of a purely mechanical origin. Given that we know now that human beings share 98.6 percent of their DNA with chimpanzees, I wonder why we find this funny? George Bush, after all, is an ape—he just happens to be a hairless one and in good company with the rest of us.

Curious George is a manifestation of a metaphor cluster that had intense

*Figure 2.* "Curious George," an anonymous Internet satire.

power in early eighteenth-century writing. Drawing on terminology from cognitive science and for reasons that will become clear, I call this metaphor cluster *situational mind blindness.* Situational mind blindness is a trope of dehumanization, albeit a very complex one: the point of it is to deny other people the perspective of rational agency by turning them into animals, machines, or anything without a mind. A simpler trope of dehumanization, if there can be such a thing, comes into play during war or conquest when one group of people demonizes another. In the presence of a hated countergroup, ingroup solidarity becomes stronger. Social norms, memes, and moral rules are shared within groups but typically denied to outgroups. The members of the hated countergroup do not count as human, and therefore moral rules do not apply to them. This tendency is so widely attested in human history that it hardly needs to be described. In only a few modern democratic cultures has such a tendency become scandalous. In one ancient democratic culture, by contrast, it was recommended as a spiritual exercise for warriors. According to Plutarch, Aristotle told Alexander the Great to "have regard for the Greeks as for friends and kindred, but to conduct himself toward other peoples as though they were plants or animals" (Plutarch 1931, 393–405). Situational mind blindness is more complex because it is a social trope, mobilized not against members of an out-group but against people whom one might encounter as part of the new trading economies of a mercantilist city at the hub of an expanding empire. What it means for writers to deploy a trope of such extreme aggression in the service of essentially social ends is one of the topics I take up in this chapter.

Situational mind blindness piggybacks on no special sense of groupishness but arises in the face of some apparent maddening irrationality. The point of

using it is to identify, and perhaps correct, how that irrationality works. It weaves through familiar devices that satire uses to catch at us. In fact, my claim is that some recognizable features of satire follow from the very cognitive flexibility that allows situational mind blindness to arise. There are some corollaries to this. First, satire picks out deep facts about our cognitive capacities. This should be a self-evident claim: it would be astonishing if a mode found in every known literate human culture did not do this. But this chapter mainly concerns satire from eighteenth-century Britain and does not address the fascinating ways the eighteenth-century satirists used mind blindness to renovate the conventions they inherited from classical writers. Nor does it broach the larger story about how genre conventions amplify cognitive capacities in general. Instead, here I describe a certain cognitive capacity and try to show how some satirists used it.

The best information about mind reading has come from research into people who, through disease or injury, do not have it. People without mind-reading capacities are not "natural-born dualists." They are unable to distinguish bodies from souls and have little capacity to discern people's motivations. They might have a good "theory of bodies," but they are "mind blind." Alison Gopnik offers a wonderful thought-experiment that simulates the feeling of mind blindness from the inside:

> This is what it is like to sit round the dinner table. At the top of my field of vision is a blurry edge of nose, in front are waving hands. Around me bags of skin are draped over chairs, and stuffed into pieces of cloth, they shift and protrude in unexpected ways. Two dark spots near the top of them swivel restlessly back and forth. A hole beneath the spots fills with food and from it comes a stream of noises. Imagine that the noisy skin-bags suddenly moved towards you, and their noises grew loud, and you had no idea why, no way of explaining them or predicting what they would do next. (Baron-Cohen 1995b, 2)

Mind blindness is undoubtedly a tragedy for autistics and their families, although some autistics seem to be gifted with heightened visual capacities. The mind blind do not enter an order of social exchange initiated by eye contact, nor do they ordinarily ascribe souls to animated bodies. Lacking fully developed mind-reading capacities, the mind blind do not lie. Mark Haddon makes this point in a lovely way in his excellent novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003). The book's hero is a fifteen-year-old boy with autism who sets off to investigate a dog found murdered in his yard. As a detective he has some unique skills, such as an obsessive interest in numbers, but he also has some

cognitive deficits. He has trouble recognizing the full spectrum of human emotion, can't cope with jokes, especially ones that depend on words having more than one meaning, and lies make him feel scared and shaky. Is this because he is "a good person," as his mother tells him? No, he replies—rather it is simply because he can't tell lies (Haddon 2003, 19).

Autistics set in motion a series of fascinating worries about the boundaries between bodies and souls, people and things. So, for example, Paul Bloom tells a little story of his own encounter with an autistic child:

> It is sometimes said that such children treat people like objects. My experience is that this can be literally true. As a teenager I worked as a counselor in a camp for autistic children, and one afternoon, a severely impaired seven-year-old boy walked up to me and placed his hands on my shoulders. I was surprised, and touched, by what appeared to be a spontaneous act of affection. But then he tightened his grip, jumped on, pressed his feet on my legs, and started to climb. It turned out that I was standing next to a high shelf, and he was using me as a ladder so that he could get to an attractive toy. Children with autism extend physical and mechanical modes of understanding to inappropriate entities, ones who, like me, are better understood in terms of mental states (It would have been simpler if he had just asked me to get him the toy). (Bloom 2004, 38)

Even among people who are not autistic, mind blindness can be a genre of cultural expression. We might think of it as situational autism. Mind blindness is flexible enough that people can adopt it aggressively, ironically, or both. Ironic mind blindness, an obvious paradox, has proven especially fruitful for literary modes: artists and writers relentlessly exploit the possibilities of mind blindness to offer their visions of history and culture.

Consider how closely Gopnik's simulation of mind blindness resembles what Norman O. Brown calls Jonathan Swift's "excremental vision" (Brown 1959) An excremental vision compacts spirit into its mechanical operations: "a hole beneath the spots fills with food and from it comes a stream of noises." People are "noisy skin bags." Mind blindness is easy to simulate; it lends itself to crude dehumanization and vulgar reduction: the editors of *Esquire* magazine ("Man at his Best") consider "shut your pie hole" to be the appropriate response to being thwarted by service people. Mind blindness is at once a specific neurological condition and a deep genre of social information that people can adapt to social purposes of their own.

Perhaps for this reason, intellectuals have long been fascinated by autistics. In 1726 Daniel Defoe published a hundred-page pamphlet on Peter the Wild Boy,

who had been found running almost naked in the woods near Hameln, in Germany, calling him "a thing in human shape" (Defoe 2001, 155). Peter was somewhere between eleven and fifteen and, though he had probably been feral for only a year or so, had no language. He was brought to London and placed in the care of Dr. John Arbuthnot. He soon became a spectacle at the court of King George and Queen Caroline, where one night "he played with a glove of Caroline's, grew fascinated by a pocket watch that struck the hours; and, as was usual with him, attempted some minor pick-pocketing. Gossips outside the court speculated as to what else had gone on that evening. The ladies in waiting, maliciously suspected to be disappointed that Peter was too young for an intrigue, were supposedly nonetheless amused to see him attempt to kiss the young Lady Walpole, the plain-featured daughter of the immensely fat and continually scheming politician Robert Walpole. Furthermore, rumours spread that he had, in breach of all civilized decorum, seized the Lord Chamberlain's staff and put his hat on before the King" (Newton 2003, 29–30).

Peter never learned to speak, and he "lived out his 'vegetory existence' as a kind of 'very old child.' He never learned to speak more than a few words but developed some sensitivity to music and mastered table manners and polite comportment. His curiosity value apparently continued well into his dotage; late in his sixties he was visited by such well-known intellectuals as the Scottish judge Lord Monboddo, the Anglo-Irish inventor Richard Lovell Edgeworth, and his novelist daughter, Maria Edgeworth" (Douthwaite 2002, 21).

Evidence suggests that Peter was not a wild child raised by bears, as rumor persistently had it, but was an autistic boy who suffered abuse in his family and ran away, living rough for only a year or so before he was taken in.[1] The title of Defoe's pamphlet, "Mere Nature Delineated; or, A Body without a Soul, Exemplified etc.," seems to anticipate modern research on how mind reading is the way we distinguish between bodies and souls, and Defoe goes into great detail about how Peter's capacities are closer to those of animals than to humans. But the true point of the pamphlet turns out to be just like the true point of many such writings on autistics—that people who lack mind-reading capacities somehow give us greater insight into our own capacities to dehumanize other people.

Why were all of these intellectuals like Lord Monboddo and the Edgeworths so fascinated with Peter? For the same reason that writers continue to be fascinated by autistic people—the breakdown in their mind-reading skills causes fascinating ripples in the surface of social norms. Oliver Sacks, for instance, has made a whole career out of writing about people whose neurological deficits

throw some features of our social world into sharp relief. Sacks has written movingly of Temple Grandin, a highly functioning autistic woman who has become a well-known agricultural scientist. While Grandin is able to pass a simple mind-reading test, "her total bewilderment about other people's minds, her inability to decipher their expressions and intentions, along with her determination to study them, study us, our alien behaviors, scientifically and systematically, as if (in her own words) she were 'an anthropologist on Mars'" (Grandin 1996, xv). Grandin has written two books describing what autism feels like from the inside. She says she "thinks in pictures" and that "words are like a second language" to her. She is able to empathize much more closely with animals, especially cows, than with other humans. Fiction and drama are puzzling to her: of Romeo and Juliet she said, "I never knew what they were up to" (xvi). Able to empathize with animals, she designs cattle chutes to keep cows from panicking as they walk to slaughter.

Sacks has also written an essay about aphasia. In his story, President Ronald Reagan is giving a speech on TV; clustered around the TV is a group of neurological patients, who all have a language deficiency called aphasia. They are laughing uproariously. Half of the patients have lost the ability to understand "words as such," but they can still understand "extraverbal cues" such as "tone of voice, intonation, suggestive emphasis or inflection as well as all visual cues (one's expressions, one's gestures)," and so on (Sacks 1998, 80). The other half of the patients have retained the ability to understand the words as such but have lost the ability to interpret extraverbal cues. In order to work his magic, Ronald Reagan apparently needed his audiences to have their linguistic capacities intact: both groups of aphasics found his speech incoherent, even deranged. Oliver Sacks directs the satire of this story not at the aphasics but at Ronald Reagan, who comes off as a charlatan in front of an audience whose powers of perception are heightened precisely because they are defective.

Conceptually relevant is the following. People's ontological categories are limited: we distinguish between person, animal, tool, plant, and natural object (Boyer 2001, 99–110). These categories are at once deeply ingrained and highly permeable. Towards all these entities, we typically adopt an intentional stance, which treats people and artifacts differently. Though complicated, artifacts are the easier case to sort out. We approach them as pragmatists, our questions radiating outwards from charitable assumptions. We ask of objects who designed them, what they are for, what they mean. We expropriate them for other uses: an old broken toaster can easily become a doorstop; a urinal can become a found object.

Towards people, our intentional stance may be no less charitable, but it is more complicated. A stunning fact about us is that we have the capacity to be obligated by figural and abstract gestures of other people, especially by their speech. We are highly normative creatures, susceptible to cries, directions, statements, requests, and commands. We can be stopped in our tracks by a sigh or a scrawled scrap of litter; in each case, we follow roughly the same practical procedure to sort out its meaning, trying—if we care—to figure out who caused it and why. Under many conditions, we would not care: the sign might turn into noise, flash, or distraction. A hubbub might break out, from which we only partially distill local voices. In public spaces, in particular, a sign must be more than usually forceful for us to take notice of it; our capacity for sympathy, always muted, is held in check by the need to cultivate what Ervin Goffman calls "a certain bureaucratization of the spirit" in public places (Goffman 1990, 56). In each of these cases, we are practicing a mild form of mind blindness. Mind blindness, too, forms the centerpiece of an ancient Western belief about aesthetics codified at many different points by philosophy and theory: this is the belief that artistic expression is accidental and meaningless. Signs are regularly taken for wonders or, as T. S. Eliot said of his own fragmentary poem *The Wasteland,* for mere "rhythmical grumbling." Much of the surface of cultural play depends on a quick blurring of the line between persons and things.

Many of our most interesting stories depend on a deeper and more sustained boundary crossing. Supernatural stories, for instance, typically involve some ontological violation or shape-shifting between categories: a prince becomes a frog, a statue bleeds, a mountain eats. Mind blindness is a form of secular metamorphosis. There is an ontological violation: people move other people out of the category of person and into the category of animal or even tool. They might do so for many reasons—because it is intellectually interesting, because they want to assert mastery over the other person, or because they think that the category mistake shows what the person is really like. All three motives come into play in the examples I explore here, but the second is the most important. Mind blindness is a tool of emotional dominance.

The literary genre that most often simulates mind blindness is satire. The history of Western satire exhibits a specifically materialist strain that denies the claims and possibilities of other minds. Two examples will make the point. Both are anticlerical. Both puzzle over the way the material surface of the body fails to cohere; both glance off the body's rude surface; both find eyes illegible; both imagine the spirit as a hollow buzz emitted from the nose. The first—I have al-

ready alluded to it—is Jonathan Swift's "Mechanical Operation of the Spirit," whose narrator, a mad Hobbesian materialist, reduces inwardness to a long sideways skid on a slippery surface. Swift represents powerful religious inspiration as metonymical thought-contagion, as in his description of the workings of the "spirit" among a group of fanatics. Influenced by an Indian sect whose members "see all their visions by help of an acquired straining and pressure of the eyes," these fanatics "violently strain their eyeballs inward, half closing the lids; then, as they sit, they are in perpetual motion of see-saw making long hums at proper periods and continuing the sound at equal height, choosing their time in those intermissions while the preacher is at ebb" (Swift 1986, 131). This is a metonymic slide down the lower links of the Great Chain of Being. The fanatic's brain is stuffed full of matter. His eyes bulge out because they are pressed from the inside, the extrusion mechanism pure contiguity. With his keen sense for the free-floating delusion and empirically unfalsifiable claim, Swift adopts a stance of mind blindness in order to deny the fanatic's claim to transcendence.

Transcendence has a special metaphorical shape: people have historically imagined it vertically. The best way of expressing it is usually allegory, a mode that integrates complex vertical relations. Mind-blind satiric materialists, however, are not interested in the way spirit penetrates downwards into matter, much less in modes that allow us to integrate high and low in one conceptual scheme. Mind-blind satiric materialists want to smash the framework that attaches one conceptual scheme to the next, preventing matter from edging its way into mind and the fanatic from channeling God. Swift's fanatics humiliate song and breath, turning them into snot and piss: "A master workman shall blow his nose so powerfully as to pierce the hearts of his people, who are disposed to receive the excrements of his brain with the same reverence as the issue of it" and "the saint felt his vessel full extended in every part (a very natural effect of strong inspiration), and the place and time falling out so unluckily that he could not have the convenience of evacuating upwards by repetition, prayer, or lecture, he was forced to open an inferior vent (ibid., 136–37). Later materialists like Lamarck will deduce process from function, finding that the extrusion of the eyeball results from heredity or desire. Swift, however, subtracts agency and cause at every turn, refusing—and here is the main fact about mind blindness—to imagine any motives at all.

Evidence has been mounting for some time that an extreme form of materialism is true. Consider the emerging field of "neurotheology." A whole range of religious experiences, it appears, can cause remarkable changes in brain func-

tioning, making some areas light up on neural-imaging machines and others close down completely. For example, people who in the course of intense meditation report a feeling of being "at one with the universe" show a lack of activity in the area of the brain that determines where the boundaries of the body are (Newberg, D'Aquili, and Rause 2001, 1–8). Epileptic seizures in the temporal lobe can cause people to feel extremely religious, as though they are in the presence of God. What would a demonic Swiftian materialist make of neurotheology? A religious skeptic, of course, can make nothing of it: a theist could easily argue that such specialized neural areas were fashioned by God so that people can perceive a spiritual dimension. So, too, a Swiftian materialist could make little hay out of such a claim since this is just the view of religious belief he holds anyway. The point of turning people into things (what you do if you are mind blind) is to use the occasion of their materialist motives to deny their claims to special transcendence. In short, mind blindness, like other modes of satire, is one way of coping with the myriad problems of status; as I will argue below, it is an especially effective way.

Literary mind blindness presents us with a glaring paradox, which is neatly revealed by a second example. The paradox is that literary mind blindness, unlike cognitive mind blindness, is a sophisticated mode of irony: it means the opposite of what it says. Irony comes into play when an author uses a character's mind blindness to communicate extra information with the reader. Consider Geoffrey Chaucer's naïve narrator Geoffrey, who, in the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales,* adopts an enthusiastically admiring attitude towards his fellow pilgrims. Through Geoffrey's lavish and intimate descriptions we see how foolish, venal, and corrupt some of the pilgrims are. Geoffrey may not be mind blind per se, but he focuses obsessively on certain disconnected details, his emotional register inadequate (from our perspective) to synthesizing them. Chaucer opens a vein of religious satire that Swift will later mine, and for the same reason. The high and the low are social markers of status hierarchy. When clerics organize their symbols along a vertical axis, they call upon habits of thought whose meaning is grounded in the social world. Their claims to transcendence sit uneasily alongside the marked social benefits they receive by jiggering those hierarchical associations: God the father, the head of the church, and so on. Although theologians may claim that social meanings are corrupt translations of otherworldly truths, clerics are vulnerable to having their metaphors translated differently or too reductively. So when Geoffrey the credulous pilgrim admires the Prioress's singing "Ful wel she song the service divyne,/Entuned in hir nose ful seemly," we hear the pinched, reedy, almost waspish tones of an emotional and spiritual nig-

gard (lines 122–123). And although Chaucer may be following courtly love conventions when he describes "hir eyen greye as glas" (line 152), the idea of eyes that neither reflect nor reveal is terrifying; so is his description of the bestial eyes of the satanic Pardoner: "swiche glaringe eyen hadde he as an hare" (line 684).

A recurring trope in satire is the unseeing eye—the eye that has misted over, the drunken eye, the "blear-eye" of the social exception. Horace, traveling to Brundisium, remarks several times on his bleary, inflamed eyes; he has to put some special salve on them (*Satires,* bk. 1, poem 5). Satirists stress the degree to which social exchange is conducted through eye contact by showing eyes deranged by social breakdown. The unseeing eye is often an emblem of failed sociability. Booth, the hero of Fielding's last novel, *Amelia* (1752), is unfairly sent to prison at the novel's opening. The prison is a hideous microcosm of the social world. The host, in the person of the prison warden, informs Booth of a local custom: to give a "garnish," or money, for drink. When Booth tells him he has no money, the keeper leaves him on his own, and he is quickly surrounded by the other prisoners and stripped of his belongings. Disoriented, he notices that his fellow prisoners are strangely happy:

> Could his own Thoughts indeed have suffered him a Moment to forget where he was, the Dispositions of the other Prisoners might have induced him to believe that he had been in a happier Place: For much the greater part of his Fellow-Sufferers, instead of wailing and repining at their Condition, were laughing, singing and diverting themselves with various kinds of Sports and Gambols. The first Person who accosted him was called Blear-Eyed Moll; a Woman of no very comely appearance. Her Eye (for she had but one) whence she derived her Nick-name was such, as that Nick-name bespoke; besides which it had two remarkable Qualities; for first, as if Nature had been careful to provide for her own Defect, it constantly looked towards her blind Side; and secondly, the Ball consisted almost entirely of white, or rather yellow, with a little grey Spot in the Corner, so small that it was scarce discernible. (Fielding 1987, 20)

Blear-eyed Moll is a figure of carnivalesque inversion; her blind eye is an important signifier of the way the social order has been turned upside down. These prisoners laugh and sing, their motives mysterious to Booth in his misery and self-absorption. Moll comes to him with her need and her desire (for money, for sex), but her single eye is completely yellow, its little gray spot scarcely discernible. Like Tiresias, Moll is a blind seer, a figure of social and sexual liminality who reveals more than she knows; she is the focus for Booth's failure to understand why the prisoners are so happy.

*Figure 3.* William Hogarth, *A Midnight Modern Conversation,* 1733.

Another persistent social trope is the eye blinded by power. William Hogarth's famous anticonversation piece "A Midnight Modern Conversation" (1733) (fig. 3) combines this trope with the trope of the drunken eye. A group of men meet in a coffee house at midnight. They get drunk and stage a parodic grotesque of a social scene, their disorder patterned in the hail of masculine lines that join nothing with nothing. Eyes neither see nor connect, with two important exceptions: two men in the center of the frame stand above their companions looking down hard at them. Their hungry eyes go unsatisfied: the men they look at continue to drink and burble placidly. These are gazes of dominance or need rather than of exchange; when sociability breaks down, avoidance replaces acknowledgment.

These examples are outliers, however. They show mind blindness as a limiting case of social knowledge, one that comes into play when social systems break down. Strangely enough, a whole culture can go through a phase of willed autism—not because social systems have broken down but because they are in the process of being born. I have said that mind blindness occurs when people move other people out of the category of person and into the category of animal, plant, or thing. Flickers of it are everywhere in early eighteenth-century British culture. Consider Addison's celebrated *Spectator* essays of 1710–12. The essays run a dialectic of insight and blindness throughout, except that insight is so extreme

as to constitute a pose of blindness; blindness, too, verges on the extreme of exposure.

The first character we meet is Mr. Spectator, a man of whom we know only that he is wealthy, learned, taciturn, and that his mother dreamt when she was pregnant that she would give birth to a judge. Mr. Spectator travels around the city taking in as much information as he can about his fellow Londoners by blending in wherever he goes ("I have been taken for a merchant upon the Exchange . . . and sometimes pass for a Jew in the assembly of stock-jobbers at Jonathan's"[*Spectator* 1, Thurs., Mar. 1, 1710–11]). His chameleon ability to take on every particular identity he encounters leads him to become abstracted from all of them; it allows him to ascend a general perch of speculative knowledge. He boasts

> Thus I live in the world rather as a spectator of mankind, than as one of the species, by which means I have made myself a speculative statesman, soldier, merchant, and artisan, without ever meddling with any practical part of life. I am very well versed in the theory of a husband, or a father, and can discern the errors in the economy, business, and diversion of others, better than those who are engaged in them; as standers-by discover blots, which are apt to escape those who are in the game. I never espoused any party with violence, and am resolved to observe an exact neutrality between Whigs and Tories, unless I shall be forced to declare myself by the hostilities of either side. In short, I have acted in all the parts of my life as a looker-on, which is the character I intend to preserve in this paper. (Ibid.)

For all its apparent simplicity, this is a complicated stance. There are echoes of both Saint Paul and Milton's Satan: the fantasy of being all things to all men easily shades over into the deepest hypocrisy. The passage could easily serve as a banner for the sort of specious bourgeois liberal universalism vilified by antiliberals from Marx onwards. The fantasy of the unseen seer, the all-seeing eye, will blossom again in Emerson. Emerson, "crossing a bare common in snow puddles at twilight under a clouded sky," enjoys "a perfect exhilaration" and becomes a transparent eyeball: "I am nothing, I see all" ("Nature" 1836). Addison, crossing a crowded cosmopolitan square, enjoys the pleasures of speculation while aiming at nothing practical. Practical agency, of course, commits you to one course of action or another. Uncommitted, he sees all and he is everything.

An eye so overstuffed with attributes that it becomes invisible may seem like the antithesis of mind blindness, but it is another version of it. I have said that situational mind blindness involves stripping a person of her human attributes and

removing her from the category of person. Mr. Spectator's engorged eye regularly shifts people into higher and lower conceptual orders. He aggregates them and he turns them into machines. Mr. Spectator has unusual powers of penetration as well as a mechanical turn. Among other uncanny fascinations, he encounters "jointed babies," or moving French puppets tricked out in the latest fashions (that is, when hostilities between England and France have not interrupted fashion trade routes). He finds English puppets on their way to France to learn to curtsy and heave the bosom (*Spectator* 277, Thurs., Jan. 17, 1711–12). He repeatedly opens up the surfaces of things to see what they are like inside. Once he finds himself "engaged in an assembly of virtuosos" who describe to him their anatomical experiments on the human body (ibid., 275, Thurs., Jan. 15, 1711–12). That night he has a wild dream. He has been invited to participate in dissecting a beau's head and a coquette's heart. The beau looks like any other man on the outside, but once they open him up they find large cavities filled with "ribands, lace, embroidery . . . love-letters, pricked dances . . . fictions, flatteries, and falsehoods, vows, promises, and protestations." The seat of his soul smells like orange-flower water "and was encompassed with a kind of horny substance, cut into a thousand little faces or mirrors, which were imperceptible to the naked eye, insomuch that the soul if there had been any here, must have been always taken upon in contemplating her own beauties" (ibid.)

There is more in this vein. A few issues later Mr. Spectator and his virtuosi explore the labyrinthine byways of a coquette's heart. They look first at the outward casing and discern "millions of little scars, which seemed to have been occasioned by the points of innumerable darts and arrows, that from time to time had glanced upon the outward coat; though we could not discover the smallest orifice by which any of them had entered and pierced the outward substance." As they penetrate further into the tangled recesses of the coquette's heart, they marvel that none of the multitudes of people she flirted with has left the slightest impression there—that is, until they come to the "very core and center of it." There to their surprise they observe "a little figure . . . dressed in a very fantastic manner" and doing a wild little dance. He turns out to be last week's dissected beau. Finally, they try to cremate the heart but find that it has a "salamandrine quality" that inures it to flame. As they stand there admiring it, it gives "a most prodigious sigh, or rather crack, and dispersed all at once in smoke and vapour" (*Spectator* 281, Tues., Jan. 22, 1711–12).

I could multiply these examples indefinitely. Stories of the flayed woman and the flayed beau abound in the satirical social writing of the early eighteenth century. Some examples are more complex than others. In book 9 of *A Tale of a Tub*

("A Digression Concerning Madness"), Swift gives us a narrator who seems reasonable at first, a projector-denizen of England's new scientific culture. Soon we find that this glassy-eyed madman has taken the idea of exposure, or penetration, a little bit too literally. The narrator tells us:

> Last week I saw a woman flay'd, and you will hardly believe, how much it altered her person for the worse. Yesterday I ordered the carcass of a beau to be stript in my presence; when were all amazed to find so many unsuspected faults under one suit of cloaths: Then I laid open his brain, his heart, and his spleen; but, I plainly perceived at every operation, that the farther we proceeded, we found the defects encrease upon us in number and bulk. (Swift 1986, 84)

Rather than a tool of insight, burrowing exposure, or enlightened investigation, the eye cuts into the body as though it were mere matter. It is important that the projector himself is without a mind, since his apparent lack of inner connectedness is what allows him to mistake mind for matter. This stance finds a rhetorical equivalent in Swift's oft-repeated desire to "lash" the world rather than engage with it, or "to vex the world rather than divert it" (Swift 1970, 584). Only by taking the world instrumentally and as an aggregate can he get it into the shape he needs to use it the way he wants to.

Swift pushed the inferences of the mind blindness trope much farther than anybody else. Mind blindness arises almost casually whenever Swift adjusts size and scale: you suddenly find yourself in a world where nothing makes sense, where the lines of objects are out of sense, and where words are mere noise. But Swiftian mind blindness needs to be distinguished from the vast store of eighteenth-century materialism, even satiric materialism, by its special emphasis on how the demands of status hierarchies can make people turn away from an intentional stance towards other people. Swift regularly inverts his culture's ocular optimism into a story about eyes blinded because they are so busy navigating the fields of power.

Lemuel Gulliver's visual powers are constantly put in abeyance by the status hierarchy to which he yearningly adapts himself, no matter how incapable of dominating him physically his "masters" are. When Gulliver is shipwrecked off the coast of Lilliput, he wades up onto the shore, drinks half a pint of brandy, and falls fast asleep, only to find himself pinned on his back by slender ropes when he wakes up. His eye is immediately distracted by the position of his body, as he is forced to stare upwards into the sun. His other senses, especially hearing and touch, become more powerful, and Swift offers a brief survey of Gulliver's phenomenology that extends all the way to the eye. It ends, though, not with ocular

reason suspending the rule of force but rather with the flaying of ocular reason itself:

> I could only look upwards; the sun began to grow hot, and the light offended my eyes. I heard a confused noise about me, but in the posture I lay, could see nothing except the sky. In a little time I felt something alive moving on my left leg, which advancing gently forward over my breast, came almost up to my chin; when bending my eyes downwards as much as I could, I perceived it to be a human creature not six inches high, with a bow and arrow in his hands, and a quiver at his back. (Ibid., 5)

Later the emperor of Lilliput, having dubbed Gulliver the "great man-mountain," seeks to overcome him by physical force, but he need not bother. Gulliver is so taken by his "majesty" that he is already subjected: "He ordered three thousand of his choicest troops who then attended him, to surround me at a distance, with their Bows and Arrows just ready to discharge: But I did not observe it; for my Eyes were wholly fixed upon his majesty" (8). Gulliver has so internalized the status hierarchy that even ineffectual Lilliputian arrows are not necessary to keep him in chains.

In a situation of assumed mind blindness, a person reacts to conditions of domination and oppression, of mastery and subjection, of status and power, by denying his or her own mind or the mind of others. Consider this staggering account by Nicholas Lemann, in a *New Yorker* profile of Dick Cheney, of what it is like to be in the vice president's presence:

> My main sensation was one of immense reassurance. His presence had an effect like that of being hooked up to an intravenous line that delivers a powerful timed dosage of serotonin reuptake inhibitors. Everything felt kind of evened out, no highs, no lows. He wasn't going to let his emotions distort his views, and he certainly wasn't going to be soft or naïve. But whenever he suggested something that, coming from somebody with a more animated manner, might be taken to indicate a swashbuckling inclination . . . his rocklike manner made it sound like the very least we could do, unless we wanted to be foolhardy.

Lemann describes the effect of being in Cheney's presence as an IV drip of good feeling; yet later on he quotes a line from one of Cheney's old rivals, whom Cheney had skillfully ousted from power. Says the defeated rival, "his most distinguishing features were snake-cold eyes, like a Cheyenne gambler's" (Lemann 2001, 60, 64). This is once again a familiar topos: of the powerful Sir Magnus Donners in *A Dance to the Music of Time,* Anthony Powell writes, "his eyes were

clear and very cold." Warm eyes are engaged; cold eyes are beyond mere social engagement. Clearly, stories about powerful people move us. Just as clearly we are uncomfortable enough with the emotions involving relative status differences to require an automating or distancing vocabulary to handle them.

Mind blindness is a highly uncomfortable trope because the psychological byways of power are uncomfortable. If you are a passionate observer of human behavior with a cold Swiftian eye, you begin to see how true it is what Juvenal said: it is impossible not to write satire (*Satire* 1, line 30). A friend reported from a recent trip to a professional conference of literary critics. He had the strange experience, he said, of standing in a small group of people listening to a famous critic discuss his latest work. The people in the group were turning their bright expectant faces like morning sunflowers towards the light. They scanned the critic's face for some sign of commitment and favor while, more furtively, checking the reactions of everyone else. The famous critic spoke a sentence. My friend was just on the verge of figuring out what the sentence meant when the group started vigorously nodding in agreement, then another person jumped in with a riff on the first sentence—which my friend found even more puzzling. Strangely, this provoked more head nodding and agreement from the group, which by now was engrossed in conversation. My friend said that he could see people's mouths moving and hear the words coming out, but the moving mouths didn't connect with the words coming out—a bit like watching a badly dubbed foreign movie. Soon he had not the foggiest notion of what people were saying, and he was stunned to see everyone else so earnestly performing the social rituals of approval and admiration. Suddenly feeling like an alien anthropologist from Mars, he thought: "The creatures are definitely speaking, even communicating with each other—they must make sense to each other, but they are not speaking to me."

In such a situation, assumed mind blindness can be a mode of emotional survival, a strategy of inner self-distancing. It is a way to climb quickly out of the social fray, to extract one's self from the myriad claims of human obligation. Nevertheless, the habit sometimes becomes binding. If someone practices mind blindness for too long, he might find that there is nobody left to talk to. Here, again, is Auberon Waugh, recounting a melancholy memorial service for the great society photographer Cecil Beaton. He finds, among other things, that there is nobody who will look back at him:

> March 24 1980. To Sir Cecil Beaton's Memorial Service at St. Martin's-in-the-Fields hoping to meet many old friends, but practically nobody is here. Perhaps the darling old Queen Mother is a little frail for these beanos, but I do feel the

> Prince of Wales might have come. Nobody would ever have heard of him if Beaton had not put his name on the map with some typically brilliant snaps of the young Prince in his pram.

It is a gloomy occasion.

> The address is given by a dreary old pooftah with a name that sounds like Buggle, but I find nobody to exchange glances with.
>
> Oh dear. When a bachelor dies, I always think of a cheese soufflé. Eat it, and it is gone. (Waugh 1985, 96)

Thus far I have stressed the ways that literary mind blindness is dehumanizing, uncomfortable, and shot through with feelings of domination; now I want to shift the point of view a bit. Can mind blindness ever be redemptive, a source of comedy? To a degree, yes. In the eighteenth century, mind blindness attached itself to a range of more or less flat characters, whose very absorption in their particulars and refusal to reflect back the personhood of the other characters provokes (or at least is associated with) a sharp increasing in mind reading among the other characters. The flat character, who neither avoids nor acknowledges the claims of other people but simply exists in a state of inanimate indifference to them, dramatically increases the pressure that the author or artist places on the mind-reading capacities of his or her audience.

Examples are varied—think of the wide range of eighteenth-century quixotes. I am going to content myself with one and then speculate about why situational mind blindness might be an appealing choice not just for satire but also for narrative more generally. Here is a rather flat character of whom I am especially fond—a young Huguenot child dressed in his Sunday best and leaving church in a crowd of his elders, prosperous French Protestants, as the ordinary and somewhat less prosperous residents of London, in typical Hogarthian fashion, engage in petty acts of thievery, venality, selfishness, gluttony, and social failure. The plate is the second in Hogarth's four times of the day series, which he did in 1738 (fig. 4).

It is a complicated scene, as Hogarth's invariably are. The scene divides into two halves and seems to move from left to right: the unruly left half, where the Londoners engage in activities that range from barely disguised cannibalism to barely disguised fornicating—seems to resolve itself in the right half—the zone of order, where the French bourgeoisie apparently sublimates its carnal appetites to the higher norms of self-love. But although this story may look neat, few of Hogarth's moral engravings resolve themselves so quickly. Indeed, of the two groups, the raw and the cooked, it is hard to tell which one Hogarth thinks less

*Figure 4.* William Hogarth, *Noon,* from *Four Times of the Day,* 1738.

of. On the one hand, the French Protestants are successful immigrants, their lace and trimmings and pomades putting the unruly mess of the English proles to shame. On the other hand, the French are narcissists from cradle to grave. In the lower right hand corner of the engraving, a prematurely middle-aged boy-fop admires himself in a greasy puddle that contains a dead cat; an adult beau spends more energy on posture and gesture than on courting his beloved; and two haggard old women stare at each other like self-obsessed twins. The three groups form a triangle of self-involvement watched over, perhaps incongruously, by an unattached, peruked gentleman. What is his role exactly? His line of sight just misses making eye contact with the fashionable lady and travels instead down her arm to her hand and out of the frame of the picture. Instead of acknowledgement, avoidance.

That grouping is matched on the left by one that might be captioned "eat your young," the cannibal theme suggested by the severed head of John the Baptist

lying on a plate above the injunction "good eating." But good eating is exactly what the children on the left do not get to do—their pies are spilling or broken, and they are heartsick, deprived, foraging. These two groups both trace out triangles of unconcern, with the ignored children at the apex of each. The English children seem physically ravenous; the French ones, if not spiritually ravenous, so filled with malaise as to not realize how spiritually neglected they are. Hogarth makes the point about spirituality in another way, too: the dead cat lying across the gutter running down the middle of the picture seems to bridge the divide between the two worlds; it has its legs open and spread suggestively in the direction of the French protestants while his front paws are stretched towards the Londoners in what looks like a position of prayer. Not only are the proles, as shown by their animal avatars, less spiritually deprived, but—let's face it—they are having more fun, too. Their food may be spilling in a grotesque parody of the baptismal font, but it is spilling because people are really getting it on, not just elaborating on the thought that they might eventually get it on.

What does any of this have to do with mind blindness? The little Huguenot child without qualities who stands at the geographical center of the scene stands also at its moral center, symbolizing its guiding tenor of complicated unconcern. Though each of the three male children—the fop, the crying pie-spiller, and the Huguenot—is at the apex of his own triangle, the Huguenot's is the largest and the only one that, like the dead cat, cuts across both halves of the scene. The other points of his triangle are the neck of the headless woman on the tavern sign (who symbolizes, according to Sean Shesgreen, "The Good [i.e., quiet] Woman.") and the head of the preacher, who closely resembles Colonel Charteris in the fourth plate of the Harlot's progress, a commanding figure of patriarchal authority. Here he is a spiritual father, and from his forward gaze we can trace a line of concern snaking down to an old woman with her head tilted, to a younger man with his head bowed, and finally to a little girl, who seems to be the little boy's older sister.

The line of concern comes snaking out of the door of the church like a tongue. But as it reaches the top of the little boy's head, it curves to the right and veers off him like Mrs. Waters's seductive glance veering off Tom Jones. It is also important that the line curves. Hogarth's iconography of gender is not especially subtle—straight lines are male and curvy ones are female. The male and the female seem to be at war for custody of this little boy, with the male clearly dominant: the male pierces, the male controls, the male watches; the female is pierced, the female is headless, and so on. The line of concern is thus a countertrend within the dominant pattern of squares and triangles, but it finally fails as an

emotional element. For the little boy is mind blind. Not only is nobody especially concerned with this little boy, but he is impervious to the failed play of eye contact around him. And well he should be: all you really get if you enter into the register of adult sociability is used—you are either cannibalized for the pleasures of a harlot like John the Baptist, or you are pawed for sex like the lady in the upstairs window, who seems to want to use her mouth to grab a morsel of food rather than for any other purpose. If you are a woman of childbearing years not engaged in some sexual activity, you get your head cut off, like "The Good Woman."

Eighteenth-century narratives of many kinds often include such person-objects to symbolize a resistance to social complexity that they at the same time heighten or stimulate. I recently came across a wonderful book, a tour de force by the novelist Jane Smiley on the history of the novel. Smiley read a hundred novels over three years and has written an epic companion to them: it is honest, funny, direct, and completely unconcerned with what academics might think of her. She writes:

> In the course of 650 years, Boccaccio and his successors have helped to create a certain kind of world. It is a world not unlike the novel, a world that seems to many people transparent and automatic but isn't. In this world, everyone, male and female, could become, might be his or her own protagonist—that is, could develop a rich inner life based on the competing demands of conscience and ambition, selfishness and social connection. In this world, each person feels a tension between himself or herself and the group, and also wishes to learn how to negotiate that tension. In this world individual existence has the potential for meaning—it can be understood and possibly changed or at least learned from. Cause and effect can be disentangled and observed. Events don't simply follow one another, as coordinate clauses do in a medieval narrative; they shape one another and grow out of one another, as subordinate clauses do in a modern narrative. In this world the ordinary person can step back, observe both the world and himself or herself, make judgment, and then make a choice. This world is an agglomeration of individuals who relate to others as individuals it is a world where "point of view" is a well-developed and important concept, the Western liberal ideal, and a paradox: if you look at a novel or a democracy one way, it is the tale of one person. If you look at it another way, it is a tale of a group. Neither the person nor the group ever gains permanent ascendancy: the two coexist. (Smiley 2005, 173)

And so it is with the little Huguenot boy—he stands where the viewer would stand were he or she thrust forward and miniaturized. We should be slightly dis-

turbed that he is our proxy, because he misses most of the good stuff going on around him. Perhaps he realizes how fragile the social compact is, how even if "the extraordinary person can step back, observe both the world and himself and make a choice," the play of social forces around him restricts and cloisters him. Like other mind-blind figures, he resists what he also provokes, namely, reflection and a consequent ordination into a sphere of human values that lies about having liberated us from the most brute, object-like facts about our nature.

# *Postmodernism Reflects*

## J. M. Coetzee and the Eighteenth-Century Novel

> To consider a thing rationally means not to bring reason to bear on the object from the outside and so to tamper with it, but to find that the object is rational on its own account.
>
> —*G. W. F. Hegel, Philosophy of Right*

Half way through J. M. Coetzee's 2003 masterpiece *Elizabeth Costello,* a book structured magnificently as eight "lessons," we encounter Professor Godwin, a scholar of eighteenth-century literature.[1] Professor Godwin is one of several of minor characters—"dogsbodies," the narrator calls them—who express some naïve, sentimental, or strongly ideological perspective about art.

Professor Godwin is by no means the most appealing of these minor characters—that designation would probably go to Steve from Manchester, a passenger on a cruise ship on which the aging Australian novelist Elizabeth Costello is invited to lecture. At dinner one evening Elizabeth Costello sits with Steve and his wife, Shirley. At their table is also Emmanuel Egudu, a handsome, masterful Nigerian novelist, who "teaches in colleges in America, telling the youth of the New World about the exotic subject on which he is an expert in the same way that an elephant is an expert on elephants: the African novel" (Coetzee 2003, 43). Emmanuel Egudu may or may not be a charlatan. He and Elizabeth were lovers many years ago, a fact they do not acknowledge but reenact by getting into a heated argument about literature. "It's interesting to hear the two of you talk," says Steve.

> "You treat writing as a business. You identify a market and then set about supplying it. I was expecting something different."
>
> "Really? What were you expecting?"
>
> "You know: where writers find their inspiration, how they dream up characters, and so forth. Sorry, pay no attention to me, I'm just an amateur." Elizabeth Costello and Emanuel Egudu fall silent. (52)

A few lessons later we meet the specialist in eighteenth-century culture. He teaches at the university in Johannesburg, where Elizabeth Costello travels to watch her sister Blanche accept an honorary degree and give a speech. Blanche long ago left academia for a nunnery. The occasion honors not her academic work, therefore, but the hospice she runs for children dying of AIDS. Her speech attacks the humanities, ending with a specific attack on "mechanical reason," which she calls the "monster" the humanities have "enthroned": "the studia humanitatis have taken a long time to die, but now, at the end of the second millennium of our era, they are truly on their deathbed. All the more bitter should be that death, I would say, since it has been brought about by the monster enthroned by those very studies as first and animating principle of the universe: the monster of reason, mechanical reason" (ibid., 123).

After her sister's speech, Elizabeth Costello is seated at a table with Professor Godwin. She tries to engage him on the subject of her sister's talk. He seems cold and puzzled. He admonishes her that

> " . . . this is a secular age. You cannot condemn an institution for moving with the times."
>
> "By an institution you mean the university?"
>
> "Yes, universities, but specifically the faculties of humanities, which remain the core of any university."
>
> The humanities the core of the university. She may be an outsider, but if she were asked to name the core of the university today, its core discipline, she would say it was moneymaking. (Ibid., 125)

He goes on. "The proper study of mankind is man. . . . And the nature of mankind is a fallen nature. . . . But that should not prevent us from trying—trying to improve." Elizabeth remarks that his period, the eighteenth century, is "the age of reason." He demurs. "I do not believe we see the period in quite so uncomplicated a way nowadays" (125–26). That is their last word together. Professor Godwin: Things as They Are.

Professor Godwin is not an unfamiliar academic type. He does not talk much, and what he does say has the air of lines memorized long ago. Faced with a lively intellectual challenge, he does not so much engage as deflect. He leaves most of the conversation to his wife. Emotionally, he sinks below the surface. Of his inner life we learn nothing; about his passions, interests, frustrations, he is silent. Nonetheless, he seems to be the sort of academic one can rely upon to pull the institutional oar. He both quotes Pope and has a pleasingly up-to-date picture of his field as having moved beyond "the age of reason." He believes that the human-

ities are the core of the university. He believes that humans should try to improve themselves. Whatever multitudes he contains he does not reveal to his dinner companions.

Professor Godwin would almost certainly not appreciate the irony (although Steve from Manchester might) that he is a bit player in the deepest fictional meditation on the problem of reason in recent memory, and an explicitly eighteenth-century meditation at that. J. M. Coetzee, the 2003 Nobel Laureate in Literature, is the most wide-ranging and dedicated interpreter of eighteenth-century British fiction at work in any medium today. Eighteenth-century fiction pervades his writing, beginning with his 1986 novel *Foe* and running through *Elizabeth Costello* and beyond. These works are brilliant and elusive—they may or may not be about politics, they may or may not be about religious belief, yet they are strongly patterned on eighteenth-century fictions. Indeed, eighteenth-century fiction may be—although I hereby reveal myself to be a member of the school of Professor Godwin's intellectual precursor Casaubon—a key to all mythologies. Well, a key of sorts. Coetzee's real concern is the problem of reason, defined almost always negatively as a historical or an interpersonal bludgeon, a lie, the sort of thing one person demands of another person when he cannot admit that her perspective is unique and is not, and never will be, his own. Reason adores its "lessons," but Coetzee does not, and in his magical hands the lessons do not fare well. The flaying of reason has become a Coetzean obsession, and he puts it through a grueling set of paces. Reason retreats when the imp god Eros, a hot little greaser with a duck flip, bursts upon the scene, leaving the higher faculties awestruck and dumb. But reason fares no better when Eros departs, leaving two people "lovers no longer but foes" (Coetzee 1999, 40). Eros and the Foe: reason's great enemies are themselves locked in an eternal struggle across Coetzee's eighteenth-century fictions.

Coetzee's writings are intellectually rigorous, learned, and philosophically accomplished. His reviews and translations cover literature from Southern Africa to Northern Europe and North America. His style seems to have been adapted in part from the reticent norms of modern philosophy. His sources are almost achingly visible—Kafka, Dostoyevsky, Beckett—but what he makes of any of them it would be hard to say without violating the strong, almost palpable code of circumspection his style demands. Eighteenth-century fictions—those small tales, generally of love (to paraphrase Samuel Johnson), all chat and gossip and prosy unselfconsciousness—seem like unlikely soil for such a wild and burnt imagination to take root in. Indeed, of all eighteenth-century novels, *Tristram Shandy* has the most supercharged afterlife in contemporary fiction, lending its

exoskeleton to Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex* as well as to Joyce, Borges, Pynchon, Calvino, and a host of others. Coetzee has no interest in Shandy's digressive charms, choosing instead a stringent, abstract version of the eighteenth-century novel that his diversionary, glee-soaked contemporaries ignore.

Is it also perhaps a sadistic version of the eighteenth-century novel? Coetzee writes about suffering. He says in an interview that "I, as a person, as a personality, am overwhelmed, that my thinking is thrown into confusion and helplessness, by the fact of suffering in the world, and not only human suffering. These fictional constructions of mine are paltry, ludicrous defenses against that being-overwhelmed, and, to me, transparently so" (Coetzee 1992, 248). The paltriness, the ludicrousness (so-called) of his defenses are themselves constructions, rather Kafkaesque ones, since they push the human to its very limits. The British novelist Zadie Smith has argued that Kafka's fiction actually stands against the buoyant and life-giving traditions of the novel in that it is "so absolute that it exists as the opposite of life and other people." "In me, by myself, without human relationship, there are no visible lies. The limited circle is pure," Kafka wrote (Smith 2003).

In its deepest recesses, Coetzee's fiction draws the limited circle almost to a close. *Elizabeth Costello* ends in a poignant section simply called "At the Gate." As the last of her trials, the Elizabeth Costello stands before a large gate, waiting to be let through. Before she can enter, some local inquisitors in thrall to the whole "Kafka business" force her to supply a statement of her beliefs. For a long time she is unable to write anything that sounds even remotely convincing. Finally, she writes that she believes in the frogs in the Dulgannon mudflats of her childhood.

> It is because of the indifference of those little frogs to my belief (all they want from life is a chance to gobble down mosquitoes and sing; and the males among them, the ones who do most of the singing, sing not to fill the night air with melody but as a form of courtship, for which they hope to be rewarded with orgasm, the frog variety of orgasm, again and again and again)—it is because of their indifference to me that I believe in them. (Coetzee 2003, 217)

On the great scale of human values, frogs are somewhere on the lower end, well below, for instance, dogs. What is it like to be a frog? Who cares? Not even frogs, apparently. Frogs care mostly about getting it on with other frogs. Their consciousness does not even include such concepts as caring, melody, reward, orgasm. These are Elizabeth Costello's concepts, unvanquished even at the gate. Her

written statement is desperate, impassioned, the sort of thing somebody writes when all other avenues of excuse and evasion are blocked. Yet insofar as she retains concepts about frogs, she is unshriven. Her statement does not open the gate. The judge hearing her case tells her impatiently that she has not gone far enough: "A stone does not believe in you. A bush. But you choose to tell us not about stones or bushes but about frogs, to which you attribute a life story that is, as you concede, highly allegorical. These Australian frogs of yours embody the spirit of life, which is what you as a storyteller believe in" (218–19). Even going as far as she has gone, Elizabeth Costello cannot extinguish the literary, allegorical, narrative "spirit of life." Kafka's ideal—"without human relationship, there are no visible lies. The limited circle is pure"—is like Zeno's paradox: the limited circle closes but is never closed.

Earlier in her travels, Elizabeth Costello goes mad. Certainly that is how the other people in her life think of her, as a woman hovering on the edge of unreason. Yet it seems more accurate to say that she has reasons; she just can't share them. Her comically terrible fate is to travel around the world giving lectures that fall flat, petering out before the end, and leaving her audiences puzzled, angry, and indifferent. But having reasons that she can't fully share, that other people reject or find nonsensical, is not the same as lacking reasons—as she finds out, to her chagrin, standing at the gate and thinking about frogs.

Elizabeth Costello's stance towards the world is Lemuel Gulliver's stance towards the world, as she herself notices: Thomas Nagel's famous essay "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" inspires in her "a quite Swiftian response. If this is the best that human philosophy can offer, I said to myself, I would rather go and live among horses" (ibid., 111). Frozen in a posture of disgust, Elizabeth Costello is the last of the female Quixotes. Her Gulliver-like sympathy for the lives of animals fills her with a sublime horror at humanity, and humanity responds by wishing to exterminate her. Here is a famous scene from the end of Coetzee's novella *The Lives of Animals,* a book he reworked into the core of *Elizabeth Costello.* Elizabeth Costello's son, John, is driving her to the airport after her lecture at his university, an occasion that has, typically, gone rather badly. She speaks first:

> "It's that I no longer know where I am. I seem to move around perfectly easily among people, to have perfectly normal relations with them. Is it possible, I ask myself, that all of them are participants in a crime of stupefying proportions? Am I fantasizing it all? I must be mad! Yet every day I see the evidences. The very people I suspect produce the evidence, exhibit it, offer it to me. Corpses. Fragments of corpses that they have bought for money.

"It is as if I were to visit friends, and to make some polite remark about the lamp in their living room, and they were to say, 'Yes, it's nice, isn't it? Polish-Jewish skin it's made of, we find that's best, the skins of young Polish-Jewish virgins.' And then I go to the bathroom and the soap wrapper says, 'Treblinka—100% human stearate.' Am I dreaming, I say to myself? What kind of house is this?

"Yet I'm not dreaming. I look into your eyes, into Norma's, into the children's, and I see only kindness, human kindness. Calm down, I tell myself, you are making a mountain out of a molehill. This is life. Everyone else come to terms with it, why can't you? Why can't you?"

She turns on him a tearful face. What does she want, he thinks? Does she want me to answer her question for her?

They are not yet on the expressway. He pulls the car over, switches off the engine, takes his mother in his arms. He inhales the smell of cold cream, of old flesh. "There, there," he whispers in her ear. "There, there. It will soon be over." (Ibid., 114–15)

Imagine how different the course of literary history would have been if Gulliver's long-suffering wife, whom he eventually allows to sit at the other end of the table from him (as long as he can stuff his nose with lavender and rue) had taken him in her arms and smelled his cold flesh, the smell of horses, and whispered in his ear, "There, there. It will soon be over." It would have been a solution of sorts, a *Lösung* (*Lösung,* with its terrible Nazi connotations, is the word that Coetzee uses to describe the mass killing of dogs in *Disgrace*). The world is looking for a solution to its Elizabeth Costellos, to its Gullivers, to its unreasonable people, to its madmen. But in Coetzee's hands, even when the world finds its solution, the Elizabeth Costellos and Gullivers have not found theirs. Their fate is to carry on a step further, to the outside of the gate, where they find that, mad as they are, they still have their human concepts, their literary and allegorical capacities, their need to make things into symbols. Perhaps Coetzee is indebted to *Tristram Shandy* after all. *Tristram Shandy*'s famous epigraph is from the stoic philosopher Epictetus: "Not things [*pragmata*], but opinions about things [*dogmata*], trouble men."

Coetzee's fiction returns again and again to the figure of the sublime symbolist, the creature divided between *pragmata* and *dogmata,* between things and his opinions about things, between madness and his own unshakeable reasons. And the sublime symbolist has an eighteenth-century face. Four eighteenth-century characters recur in Coetzee's fiction: a madman—Gulliver; an economic man—

Robinson Crusoe; a fool—Friday; and a man and a woman in the heat of sexual confusion—Lovelace and Clarissa. These characters have become more pronounced in Coetzee's recent writing, but they have always been present. Think of Michael K (the fool) or the little girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (again the fool). Elizabeth Costello is the madman, and so is her sister, Blanche. Petrus is Robinson Crusoe, a *homo economicus,* and so at moments is Elizabeth Costello's son, John. The burdens and emphases shift. Sometimes these characters are major and sometimes minor; sometimes they are round and full, sometimes flat. They take their turn in the spotlight like figures in an opera seria. Yet the one thing they refuse, consistently, to do is provide us any relief from the pain of their sublime symbolism. Their madness is cold and unregarding.

James Wood has recently put this problem in quasi-theological terms, describing Coetzee's fiction as literature's answer to philosophy, as proof that philosophy has been out-imagined after all. Reason has been trampled by the wilder efflorescence of Dionysian expression, and this turn in Coetzee's fiction amounts to "a kind of religion, akin to the worship of God who gives us nothing back"—and this cold God is like "the novelist's characters, who are believed in by the novelist, but cannot themselves believe in the novelist" (Wood 2003) Dionysius may be Coetzee's reason-killing God, but he is a rather icy Dionysius.

Coetzee's obsession with the madman, *homo economicus,* the fool, and the lovers is really an obsession with four different faces of fanaticism. To see why, let me return to the problem of reason. Reason is what Coetzee's fanatical characters want to pervert. Shifting the frame slightly, I can describe reason as a matter of cognitive heuristics, by which I mean decision-making rules that we use intuitively to navigate our environment. Ranging from the simple to the complex, they amount to cues for making inferences and rules for stopping to move on to the next decision. An extremely simple example would be the rule that correlates motion to some purpose, a rule that is adaptively rational if not fully adequate to the world. In other words, if you detect motion, you should assume that motion is intentional and act accordingly, even if the motion turns out to be random and unintentional.

A more complex heuristic is falling in love. Falling in love is an emotionally triggered stopping rule that makes you end your mate search, even if temporarily, and form a deep bond with one person (Gigerenzer 1999, 31–32). But heuristics are tricky because they are far from optimal; it is not that they are suboptimal, it is just that optimization is no part of the general heuristic picture, any more than are coherence or correspondence are part of the general heuristic picture. Instead, evidence is mounting that cognitive heuristics are neither optimal

nor coherent, nor are they especially designed to hook onto the world. They are "fast and frugal," designed to "achieve at least some minimum level of a particular variable," but not necessarily "to achieve its maximum possible value."[2] Another term for fast and frugal reason is *satisficing,* a word coined by the psychologist Herbert Simon to suggest both *suffice* and *satisfy.* Simon also said that people are "just rational enough." Yet the idea that people satisfice, or are just rational enough, contradicts the classical picture of reason, which, in many different traditions, claims that reason is unfettered and that it selects from among a range of alternatives. Reason is a far-seeing demon or god with the power to maximize utility along a wide range of variables (1–34).

Satisficing has roughly two opposites, maximizing and optimizing. Barry Schwartz, a psychologist at Swarthmore, has written a fascinating book called *The Paradox of Choice,* in which he illustrates satisficing and maximizing as consumer behaviors. Maximizers are people who try to make the best possible decision in every situation, taking as many different variables into account as possible. Satisficers are people who try to make the best decision quickly with limited information, not worrying to much about making the absolutely best decision but rather with making decisions that are good enough. As it happens, satisficers are much healthier and happier than maximizers; according to Schwartz, people who worry about maximizing every variable of their decision suffer many more stress-related disorders than people who satisfice— stress that late-capitalist consumerism surely contributes to by asking us to make choices along several different variables just to order, say, a cup of coffee in the morning (Schwartz 2004, 78, 86).

Maximizing is one alternative to satisficing; another is optimizing. Satisficing is maximizing with respect to a range of constraints or variables; optimizing is simply maximizing with respect to one variable. This is where fanaticism comes in, because fanatics are simply people who optimize one variable, or a small variable cluster, and never compromise on it. They are stubborn optimizers, committed to some set of principles that isn't subject either to being swayed by other people's reasons or to Lilliputian demands of just-sufficient reason.

Coetzee's four recurring characters are stubborn optimizers; that is, they are committed to maximizing some fundamental good that is full, unwavering, and finally recognizable as good only by them. That commitment helps to create in Coetzee's novels what Alex Woloch, in his brilliant study of minor characters, calls "character-space," the way characters "get continually contrasted, juxtaposed, related to others" (Woloch 2004, 43; Woloch is here talking about Jane

Austen but pithily identifying a major narrative mechanism). For each of Coetzee's novels—though the tendency has become much more pronounced in his most recent ones—features some character or combination of characters whose own beliefs grow ever more consistent with themselves the more contact they have with the ordinarily rational characters. Their beliefs also grow ever more impervious to the play of social exchange. So each of these fanatical characters insists on his or her own completely original stopping rule, the point on which all further decisions are taken and after which no negotiations are possible. This is because Coetzee's characters seem to hate pleasure. Pleasure is one of the most powerful ecological incentives that we have to short-circuit the maximizing search. Pleasure causes people to choose short-term benefits rather than long-term ones. Unlike pleasure seekers, fanatics forsake any immediate payoff in favor of some payoff that may never be realized—and whose appeal, one suspects, is partly that.

Coetzean fanaticism is like desire itself—perhaps Petrarchan, always longing, never fulfilled. Various characters in Coetzee's fiction repudiate reasons or even reason in favor of something else, something akin to the immediacy of acting without ideas. They say things like "The knowledge we have is not abstract" or "If principles are what you want to take away from this talk, I would have to respond, open your heart and listen to what your heart says" (Elizabeth Costello) or "I'm not going back for an idea, I'm just going back" (Lucy Lurie). They insist that reason cannot constrain a "mad heart" (David Lurie), and they even admire it as a theme in the things they teach: "Good or bad, he just does it. He doesn't act on principle but on impulse, and the source of his impulses is dark to him" (David Lurie describing the figure of Lucifer in Byron's "Lara"). They give their motives names from the Greek Gods: "Suffice it to say that Eros entered. After that I was not the same" (David Lurie to the university committee).

Is this quality of acting without words something like pleasure? Certainly when David Lurie pursues his student Melanie Isaacs he is acting hedonistically, yet he gets no joy from it. Pleasure is not a reason for most of Coetzee's characters. Pleasure is too full, too much like a plenum, too much like the thing grasped. Coetzee's characters reach after reasons but never grasp them. And what seems even worse is that the reasons they reach for are never spelled out—and never can be spelled out—often to the explicit frustration of other characters who try to spell them out on their behalf. So David Lurie complains that his self-sacrificing daughter, Lucy, is "like a nun who lies down to be violated so that the quota of violation in the world will be reduced" (Coetzee 1999, 148); but this is only margin-

ally Lucy's perspective about herself. And thus the dynamics of the hunt fall into place between two people, both of whom are committed to reasons they can't spell out, and both of whom seek to spell out reasons for the other.

The hunt for reasons and the resistance of reasons to being hunted—a resistance perhaps to being turned into a "lesson" for somebody else to batten on—is the dynamic of the Coetzean chase. The chase fills out all of Coetzee's narratives in one way or another. The form of the chase is sex, often painful sexual obsession. Any dedicated reader of Coetzee is likely to feel this. I have said that Coetzee's fiction returns obsessively to four strange unaccountable characters—Gulliver, Robinson Crusoe, Friday, and Lovelace and Clarissa—but Coetzee's main focus, the place where his energy goes, is towards the man and woman sexually entwined, towards "the problem of sex." And thus the text most powerfully in Coetzee's fiction is *Clarissa.*

In an essay published in his 1999 collection *Stranger Shores,* Coetzee writes that he had long had an "idle ambition" to adapt *Clarissa* to the screen, but he never did it because he could not "resolve in [his] mind the general question of how to bring to life an action that consists so much of people sitting and writing letters to one another" (Coetzee 2001, 23). The idea that form would present any obstacle is a red herring. *Disgrace* is as strong an adaptation of *Clarissa* as we are ever likely to see, yet he has reduced the vast epistolary armature to three tiny almost insignificant letters, one a mere dispatch.

Apart from the letters, all of *Clarissa*'s major elements are present in *Disgrace,* but they are fractured and split up between characters, motivations are reassigned, and the story is retold from a range of points of view. That *Disgrace* should be an experiment with *Clarissa,* a novel about (as its title page says) "the misconduct both of parents and children in relation to marriage," is peculiar for a novel widely hailed as an allegory of South Africa's painful transition from an apartheid state to a democratic multiracial one. But as in his two earlier allegorical fictions, *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *The Life and Times of Michael K.,* Coetzee's South Africa is generalized and symbolic, and his notorious reticence about confession leads him to starve his writing of anything that could be considered directly allegorical or even metaphorical. The emblematic Coetzean scene is one in which some great cruelty to an animal or to another person hangs on the periphery of a strongly delineated point of view. This is also the case in *Disgrace:* a story about the breakdown of political society and economy and a story about an irreversible land transfer is run as a story about psychological blindness and insight, a story about mind reading.

Coetzee's commitment to fracturing this text and reassigning its elements to

different characters fits in well with his ongoing literary experiments, but it makes his experiment with Richardson rather strange, evasive, and scarred. What then does it mean to say that *Disgrace* is about *Clarissa?* Several things. First, *Disgrace* is about a rape, or perhaps more than one. Like the rape in *Clarissa,* there are many possible ways of understanding the rapes in *Disgrace,* including—to move directly to the most frightening—that they didn't happen. This is because all three rapes, the rape of Clarissa, of Melanie—"not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration" (ibid., 25)—and the rape of David's daughter, Lucy—come quickly to involve problems about testimony, and more specifically, about how quickly testimony veers away from fact and towards its own interpretive antecedents. The pattern is set by Clarissa herself, who speaks ever more compulsively about her experiences after she has been raped and the facts of the matter have grown cloudy. Twice she comes down to Lovelace in a white nightdress, her eyes burning and her hair streaming, like a great operatic or tragic heroine, like Donna Elvira in *Don Giovanni,* to point her finger at her tormentor and to accuse him. Lovelace himself is reduced to babbling in embarrassment.

Second, like *Clarissa, Disgrace* is about a rising class of new landowners displacing a people habituated to rule. Lucy's mother is Dutch and her father English, so she is a descendant of the two nations that colonized South Africa. She and her farm are being annexed by the inevitable Petrus, the new man, the stone man. Petrus, says Lucy, "is my new assistant," but then she adds, "in fact, since March, co-proprietor" (ibid., 62). Of himself Petrus says: "I am the gardener and the dog-man." Petrus is remarkably fertile: he has a young wife who is expecting a baby, another wife in Adelaide, and children, "some of them grown up" (64). Coetzee runs the Abraham and Isaac story in the background of *Disgrace* like a silent partner, in much the same way that Kafka does in *The Trial.* Petrus is in the role of God: he supplies a sheep for the sacrifice, whereas David Lurie meekly offers up his own child. It is not a fair exchange.

David Lurie greets the rise of this new class not with an aristocrat's proprietary anger, as Lovelace greets the Harlowes, nor with the desire to hunt one of its members, but with resignation, the resignation that Abraham showed in front of God or that he himself shows in a remarkable scene in which he bows to Mrs. Isaacs. So resigned is he that he briefly entertains the idea that rape is an especially brutal form of distributive justice—the rapists are tax gatherers who simply exact a price for allowing Lucy to stay on her farm. Both Petrus's final victory over the Luries and David's resignation to it are prefigured by a terrifying little scene early on in the novel in which David has falls asleep on the couch:

> When he awakes, Petrus is beside him on the sofa with a bottle of beer in his hand. He has turned the volume higher. "Bushbucks," says Petrus. "My team. Bushbucks and Sundowns." Sundowns take a corner. There is a melee in the goalmouth. Petrus groans and clasps his head. When the dust clears, the Bushbucks goalkeeper is lying on the ground with the ball under his chest. "He is good! He is good!" says Petrus. "He is a good goalkeeper. They must keep him." (Ibid., 75)

Petrus's style—"he is good . . . they must keep him"— is an uncanny parody of Coetzee's own pared-down style. Is the author, too, resigned to Petrus's inevitable victory? Petrus does command the show to a surprising degree. His judgments here about Bushbucks and Sundowns foreshadow his later judgment about the rape and its aftermath—"I also say it is bad. It is bad. But it is finish"—judgments that Lucy, and the novel itself, come apparently to accept (201). Another signal that Petrus is a possibly competing center of authorial power is that he is one of only a few characters whose point of view Coetzee never represents (Bev Shaw, angel of death, is another). Petrus makes statements and demands, but he doesn't have a discernible take on things. If Coetzee replaces political society with a series of psychological moves, Petrus, who most clearly figures that breakdown, gets no psychological representation at all. He thus figures pure agency, perhaps authorial, certainly terrible: agency that directs without admitting light on its own motives.

Finally, *Disgrace* is about disgrace. The word *disgrace* is a Richardsonian obsession, up there with *matchless, step, singular, my father's house,* and other key words. *Disgrac*e is a word owned, initiated, and stamped by the Harlowes, although, like other things belonging to them, Lovelace is eventually forced to take it on as his, in a way more terrible than he could ever have imagined. For the Harlowes, disgrace is relational. They use the word exclusively as a transitive verb or the object of a preposition: somebody is either disgracing something or falling into disgrace. Indeed, the first few times anybody speaks about disgrace, it is because somebody is—or threatens to be—"in" disgrace. Disgrace, like shame, is a condition brought on by that sleepless monitor, the "eye of the world." It demarcates the vast uncharted terrain outside agreed-upon social norms. If disgrace shows the Harlowes as morally undeveloped, depending on shame to keep people in line, it is nonetheless perversely optimistic, even socially affirming: the negative limit at least keeps everyone interacting.

The optimism comes at a cost, specifically, a cost to personhood. The Harlowes view each other not as fully autonomous selves but as means to some end.

Women and children bear this truth much more keenly than men do. If disgrace comes to the men inside Harlowe place, it comes via the women. For women, disgrace is either impending or realized, depending on how far outside the pale they have traveled. And when somebody has gone well beyond the bounds she loses her capacity to socialize and becomes an *instrument*—another word Richardson dotes on—of disgrace to the ones left inside. Clarissa does not entirely object to this state of affairs: she seems to take the threat of being stripped of her personhood as the basic price of social membership. The question is, At what point does being a tool in the hands of someone else become too costly for her psychologically?

The question comes up frequently in the novel's early going, as a threat that siblings make to each other. Arabella and James are crude adolescent Harlowes: they seem to want to test the big Harlowe threat on each other with little understanding of its true power. Clarissa is sensitive to their bullying. When somebody threatens to push her over the line between person and instrument, she becomes most upset. One of her first worries about James Harlowe is that in getting her to marry Solmes, he is trying to "make me an instrument of his revenge upon Lovelace; or, if I refuse, throw me into disgrace with my whole family." She elsewhere justifies a catty remark about her fat sister by asking rhetorically, "How can one be such a reptile, as not to turn when trampled upon!" Her point is that to let herself be threatened with disgrace by her sister would be to be sink into a state of reptilian insensibility.

Only a rare novelist can make the world of Harlowe Place seem a haven of sunny optimism, but Coetzee does. The word *disgrace* appears only a few times in his novel, but its short career traces in miniature its entire trajectory in Clarissa, and thus Coetzee's reading of Richardson's novel. At first disgrace is a relatively mild shame marker, but eventually it darkens, becoming a sign of metaphysical rupture and disease, a state in which people are entirely instruments in the hands of the more powerful, angry gods.

*Disgrace* begins as a Harlowe word, wielded against David Lurie by his angry and censorious ex-wife, who berates him over his affair with the student: "The whole thing is disgraceful from beginning to end. Disgraceful and vulgar too. And I'm not sorry for saying so" (ibid., 45). David rebels against this way of describing his erotic adventure, but maybe something about the word sticks with him. After he is drummed out of his job, he tells the pigeon-necked Bev Shaw, with her doses of dog lethal that he is in disgrace. His later thoughts about disgrace grow harsher. In his mind, Lucy's rape and his failure to protect her from it are equivalent—"Lucy's secret, his disgrace." He imagines that dogs feel the "dis-

grace of dying" by Bev's lethal injections. Finally, when he goes to apologize to the student's family, Melanie's father, Mr. Isaacs, a devout Christian, asks David if he has learned any lessons (hard Coetzean word). David replies in the following way: "I am being punished for what happened between myself and your daughter. I am sunk into a state of disgrace from which it will not be easy to lift myself. It is not a punishment I have refused. I do not murmur against it. On the contrary, I am living it out from day to day, trying to accept disgrace as my state of being. Is it enough for God, do you think, that I live in disgrace without term?" (172).

What does it mean to live in "disgrace without term"? Coetzee's fiction dances around this question as though it were the true north, as though that condition orients his characters to one another. "Disgrace without term" is of course another name for the place he sends Elizabeth Costello and his other sublime symbolists (including the dogs) when the world is finished with them. And "disgrace without term" may even have its provenance in the African novel. Think of the Evil Forest surrounding Umuofia, the doomed Ibo village in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart:* like disgrace in the Harlowe lexicon, it is the place where people go to lose their personhood.

Losing one's personhood does not always have to be a Gulliverian horror. It can be emotionally tempting, even beguiling. In 2003 I went to hear Coetzee deliver his essay on *Clarissa* from *Stranger Shores.* In a few strokes, he developed a reading of Clarissa's "soul-harrowing beauty" as just one entry point into a widespread otherworldly perspective in the novel. Clarissa herself is the person most contemptuous of the world, insisting on the absolute inviolability of her virginity and later, of her person. Coetzee read his essay, and people were very respectful, even awed.

All the same, it wasn't long before discussion turned, as it always does, to the notorious question of what Clarissa herself wanted—a question that readers of the novel have been debating since before Richardson even finished writing it. The question is always fascinating, partly because it seems as though careful reading of the novel could provide evidence one way or another, even though it never does. Somebody mentioned the famous scene at the gate leading out of Harlowe Place on the night when Clarissa runs away with Lovelace after months of close confinement by her family. We began to ask the questions everybody always asks when they get to that scene: Does Clarissa voluntarily turn the handle to flee or is she coerced? What role do Lovelace's machinations—and those of his agent, Joseph Leman—play in pressuring Clarissa one way or another? These questions might be interesting to ask of somebody with an ordinarily muddled (and worldly)

perspective on her own motives, but about somebody with such a strong devotion to the absolute, they become almost too delicious to bear.

As I was sitting there listening to this conversation, I found myself forming a little narcissistic wish. It was not a typical academic wish (the sort that has to do with what Samuel Johnson called "talking for victory"). Instead, it was the desire to be a heroine in a novel—not to be as beautiful as Clarissa or as rich or as celebrated, but to be a little bit of a flatter character than I am. I wanted to have my choices constrained, to have my freedom suspended, to be able to dabble on a tiny canvas. If it is not foul to say this about somebody who is raped and tortured, Clarissa enjoys certain privileges as a literary character. She gets to work out elemental questions about why she does what she does in a tightly constrained space, a space in which all other questions have been suspended so there is no choice but to focus on the most minute of her actions. Those tiny actions have sparked centuries of debate—about whether she meant to turn the door handle—indeed whether she *did* turn the door handle—and so on. I was fleetingly jealous of the way all the deep questions about agency could be reduced to the action of the nerves and tendons of a hand on the latch of a gate, to a simple superimposed narrative of cause and effect.

The figure of the person with her hand on a latch trying to force her way to a decision, or being blocked from completing her intention, may seem like something of an existentialist set piece, but for several of Coetzee's sources it is a rather uncomplicated emblem of moral struggle or even just of action, full stop. One of the novels deeply inside Coetzee's *Foe* is Defoe's *Roxana,* which occasionally features tiny, rather exposed vignettes of humans struggling to make choices in the world around them. When she finally marries her rich Quaker, Roxana says she is so pleased with being called "her ladyship" that she "was like the Indian King at Virginia, who having a house built for him by the English, and a Lock put upon the door, would sit whole day together, with the key in his hand, locking and unlocking, and double-locking the door; with an unaccountable pleasure at the novelty" (Defoe 1996, 246).

Other examples are Count von Stauffenberg, hero of an exceedingly bad historical novel by the English novelist Paul West, which Elizabeth Costello eviscerates in one of her awful public lectures—not because it is bad but because it trucks with evil in the way it describes the torture of the Hitler plotters (it doesn't actually truck with evil; Elizabeth Costello's description of the novel adds evil that isn't there to begin with because Coetzee was capable of writing it and Paul West wasn't). Von Stauffenberg is, of course, the leader of the Hitler plotters, a group of aristocratic career army officers who became disgusted by Hitler's actions and

sought to kill him. After several painfully thwarted attempts, von Stauffenberg delivered a bomb in a briefcase to the Wolfsschanze field headquarters in East Prussia, where Hitler was meeting with senior aides. After he had deposited his briefcase and left the room, an officer nudged it to the outside of one of the columns supporting the big map table, and the column took the force of the blast. Four people were killed, but Hitler was only slightly injured. Von Stauffenberg was shot at once, and his conspirators were strung up with piano wire, the whole thing filmed for Hitler's pleasure. Finally, consider a complicated example from an even deeper Coetzean source: *The Brothers Karamazov.* Ivan Karamazov tells his brother Alexei that the suffering in the world—he is thinking especially of a young boy torn apart by dogs at the command of a rapacious general—is too much and that he wants to "turn back his entrance ticket." The line gets briefly quoted and reimagined by Elizabeth Costello at the gate.

If Clarissa is willing selectively to entertain the idea that she can become an instrument in someone else's hands, if she is willing to let the boundaries of her own personhood coincide metaphorically with those of Harlowe Place and yet step outside those boundaries, Lovelace repeatedly and persistently vows that any reduction to instrumentality would kill him. In fact, he says it so loudly and so often that the other characters first tease and eventually taunt him with it when, predictably, the thing comes to pass that he most fears. Thus, in their final scenes together, Clarissa curses him as a "cruel implement of my brother's causeless vengeance," and he is temporarily made "speechless." The point is that the Harlowes have won—the moment Clarissa turns the handle on that gate she is outside the realm of what counts as sociability and in the vast beyond known as disgrace, where personhood is provisional and one is more likely to be an implement. This constellation of feelings profoundly interests Coetzee; and he runs his version of Clarissa from the perspective not of Clarissa, who chooses to relinquish her personhood, but from the perspective of Lovelace, who doesn't realize that he has already done so.

All of this leads us in a roundabout way to sex. None of this business about instrumentality and personhood is exactly what Coetzee talks about when he describes his interest in *Clarissa.* Instead, he talks about Clarissa's beauty, and he talks about it in the way that a particularly intense and intelligent man might talk about a woman who mystifies him. Such a voice, I do not hesitate to say, is not hugely fashionable in American literary critical circles. In fact, there are distinct similarities between, say, the way David Lurie describes a beautiful woman and the way Coetzee's critical persona does. That voice is unapologetic about its desires, insisting on the claims of its masculine wants unbowed. Seem-

ingly in defense of his desires, David Lurie tells an emblematic little story about a golden retriever at Kenilworth who lusts after bitches in heat until his owners beat him so severely that when he smells one he runs around the yard whimpering, his tail between his legs, thoroughly alienated from his own nature. Let that story be a caution to anybody who tries to reroute the sexual desire of the male animal!

So, Coetzee writes, the great obstacle in the way of his adapting *Clarissa* to the screen is Clarissa's beauty. He believes that there is a "crisis going on in Lovelace, to which Richardson does less than justice": "What is the correct response of the human being, and specifically a man, to beauty?" Just how important Lovelace's crisis is to Coetzee's reading of the novel is underscored by his energetic views on how he would cast Clarissa in a film of the novel. Unfortunately, there is a film of *Clarissa,* done by the BBC in 1991, and the director cast Saskia Wickham in the lead, an actress whom Coetzee describes as homely and plain but who is actually at one end of the range of a conventional sort of British prettiness. Coetzee criticizes the filmmakers for this choice: "the muted way in which the part is played represents a deliberate reading of the book, in which Clarissa is unexceptional because she stands for any and every victim of patriarchal power" (Coetzee 2001, 24). By contrast, he would "prefer a quite different casting of the female lead, to match a quite different interpretation of her fate. I would give the role to an actress who is not merely more attractive but of, as Lovelace puts it, 'soul-harrowing beauty.'"

"Soul-harrowing" is an infrequently used Richardsonian epithet, but "soul-harrowing beauty" occurs only once, soon after the rape, in one of the scenes in which Clarissa is driven mad by Lovelace's evasions. Eventually she breaks down and begs him to kill her: "Then, baring, with a still more frantic violence, part of her inchanting neck—Here, here, said the soul-harrowing beauty, let thy pointed mercy enter!" To find an actress who could embody this particular vision of Clarissa—Lovelace's vision of her after he has raped her and as she stands before him in a frenzied nightdress pointing a dagger at her throat—is certainly unimaginable. And that is of course the point: Coetzee does not want an actress at one end of any range, he wants an actress outside the range altogether. He wants that because this is how Lovelace sees her. One of Elizabeth Costello's fantasies is to be fucked by a god—Zeus in the guise of a swan, his great wings whirring. Perhaps that is how Coetzee thinks of Lovelace, too, as someone who yearns to be fucked by a god.

If Lovelace so yearns, Richardson is the one who implanted those desires. And not only did he implant them but he also gave them a fertile soil to grow in. Re-

ligion comes into the novel as Clarissa's path to salvation, but it comes in, too, in the novel's commitment to seeing Clarissa's virginity in the way that she does, through the lens of Christian Neoplatonism: an absolute, inviolable mystery, a sealed garden beyond the realm of sense. In Coetzee's view, virginity is the key to the novel's entire symbol system, a deep underlying pattern of thought founded on "certain mythic dualisms . . . that are irreversible in the sense that you can move from state A to state B but not from state B to state A: child-adult, presexual-sexual, virgin-woman, unfallen-fallen, perhaps also wife-whore" (ibid., 29). And it is this pattern of thought that interests Coetzee, leading him to talk in a direct way about interpretation and what it means:

> In wondering with Lovelace whether there is not something "merely notional" in the violation, in being reluctant to see Clarissa as indelibly marked by it, I as reader and potential re-presenter of Clarissa concede to participating in a certain violence of interpretation, a violence against which Clarissa in effect protests on those numerous occasions when she resists the right assumed by others to interpret her (to interpret such involuntary motions of her body as blushing, for instance). The rape is in the first place Clarissa's, not Lovelace's or any one else's, to interpret, and the second half of the book is given over to her own very powerful interpretation of the event, an interpretation of whose rightness she is convinced to the point of dying for it.
>
> Because of Clarissa's protests, and because of the conviction carried by her self-interpretation, my attempt to frame that self-interpretation, together with the interpretation of rape that Richardson offers by creating a fable in which the raped woman dies, by placing both within a specific historically bounded religious and cultural tradition, must itself carry overtones of violation. But such a countercharge must have its limits. If it is further claimed that for a man—any man—to interpret rape or to interpret a woman's interpretation of rape in itself carries overtones of violation, then we are still under the sway of the sentimental notion of womanhood that Richardson did so much to establish—the notion of the woman's body as special, compounded of the animal and the angelic in ways beyond a man's comprehending. (Ibid., 32)

Let me try to say what Coetzee is up to here. He aligns himself with Lovelace, but Lovelace the interpreter, not Lovelace the rapist. Lovelace the interpreter is willing to allow Clarissa her stance up to a point, but he is not willing to let her refusal to be interpreted interfere with his desire to do so. He thinks her stance is full of fantasy. To disallow his or any man's interpretation on the grounds that it would "carry overtones of violation" is to remain committed to the picture of the

"woman's body as special, compounded of the animal and angelic in ways beyond a man's comprehending."

This all sounds admirably clear as a procedure: weigh two points of view in the balance and choose one, the man's. It is bold—choose the man's point of view even though that the man is grossly discredited. Choose it, and by choosing it fly in the face of a liberal feminist consensus that a person who has been raped has the absolute right to tell her story unimpeded by doubts about her intentions, her state of mind, or her motivations. You may not agree with his stance, but it is a stance admirably arrived at by clearing up some of the muddle inside an ordinary person and turning it into a principle.

So what then of David Lurie, plaything of Eros, who finds himself facing down women in roughly the way Lovelace faces down Clarissa? Is he meant to be an embodiment of this brisk Coetzean principle, this clarity? Is he able to apply this—hard Coetzean word—*lesson* to the women he encounters? The question is relevant because so much of *Disgrace* concerns David Lurie's phenomenology, and so much of that phenomenology revolves around his thinking about women, turning in the track of his sexual feelings and desires. David's two central encounters, of course, are with Lucy, his daughter, and with Melanie Isaacs, the blank and confused young student in his Romantic Poetry class whom he seduces and whom he thinks of as his symbolic daughter: "Tell Daddy what's wrong," he instructs her. The women are twins: Lucy is the light one, Melanie the dark one. David has a series of sexual thoughts about both women. These thoughts match up with their objects—the women he has these thoughts about—in only the most oblique ways. He thinks about Lucy's friend Helen, who may or may not be her lover. Helen has gone back to Johannesburg, maybe for good. Helen is fat and unattractive. Lucy is heavy and getting heavier, but she could be attractive:

> Attractive, he is thinking, yet lost to men. Need he reproach himself, or would it have worked out like that anyway? From the day his daughter was born he has felt for her nothing but the most spontaneous, most unstinting love. Impossible she has been unaware of it. Has it been too much, that love? Has she found it a burden? Has it pressed down on her? Has she given it a darker reading?
>
> He wonders how it is for Lucy with her lovers, how it is for her lovers with her. He has never been afraid to follow a thought down its winding track, and he is not afraid now. Has he fathered a woman of passion? What can she draw on, what not, in the realm of the senses? Are he and she capable of talking about that too? Lucy has not led a protected life. Why should they not be open with each other, why should they draw lines in times when no one else does? (158)

Following his thought down its winding track, refusing to draw lines—these are the actions of a hero, and David is a hero to himself. His heroism depends on a rather romantic conception of himself as the fallen guide, Satan, "a stranger in this breathing world,/a thing of dark imaginings," even the golden retriever at Kenilworth whimpering when he smells a bitch. These thought patterns are familiar, linear, and practical; they "solve the problem of sex rather well," to come back to the novel's first line.

The problem is that these linear thoughts, these soi-disant reasons, are massively ironized—you might even say "outplayed"—by the deeper patterns of the book. The patterns that outplay David's linear thoughts are the stories he cannot contain, the ones whose logic he is unaware of: *Clarissa,* of course, but also Kafka's *The Trial,* and through it, two stories from the Bible: that of Abraham and Isaac and of Job. David, Lucy, and Melanie become entangled in these stories in ways that he is barely aware of, since he is thinking mainly of other stories, stories involving those male fantasy heroes Byron and Satan and Wordsworth. But the Bible stories are there, nonetheless, permeating *Disgrace* in the same way that *Clarissa* does: all their elements are scrambled and reassigned, actions split up between characters, characters given different motives, and so on.

The essential elements of the Abraham and Isaac story are the promise of a new nation, a covenant in which reproductive access is traded for land; the name *Isaac;* a sheep; a series of substitutions; a binding; a "test" or several of them; a woman apparently sexless or barren who suddenly, unaccountably becomes pregnant; the willingness of a man to "give up" something he cares for; and the conflation of parenthood and murder. Of course, the Abraham and Isaac story does not get reconstituted here in any straightforward way: threads of it wind around other threads—there is Melanie Isaacs herself, sacrificed not to mighty Yahweh but to tiny Eros, and so on. But the same abstractions govern both worlds, the notion that fertility is connected in a deep sense to land access, that the problem of land is closely connected to the "problem of sex," which David Lurie prematurely congratulates himself for having solved in the first line of Coetzee's novel. The last lines of the novel are taken directly from the Abraham and Isaac story. David Lurie surrenders his last friend, a crippled dog, to the killing fires of mercy:

> Bearing him in his arms like a lamb, he re-enters the surgery. "I thought you would save him for another week," says Bev Shaw. "Are you giving him up?"
>
> "Yes, I am giving him up." (Ibid., 220)

So between the novel's first and last lines, sex has turned into sacrifice, and David, with no promise of a covenant, has willingly become a mute inglorious Abraham.

The Abraham and Isaac story has a long habit of outplaying any set of thoughts that try to contain it. One of the most chilling examples in all English literature comes, as it happens, from *Clarissa.* In the novel's long, sad denouement a passage springs off the page like a coiled snake, with such erotic intensity that I wonder how Richardson could have held to his own fiction that he was a great moralist. Clarissa finally escapes Mrs. Sinclair's house, where she had been raped, by changing clothes with the rather credulous young Mabel, who lives there. Her absence is immediately discovered, and it falls to Belford to inform Lovelace what has happened. In response, Lovelace unleashes a long, intense, pornographic lament.

> It is certainly as much my misfortune to have fallen in with Miss Clarissa Harlowe, were I to have valued my reputation or ease, as it is that of Miss Harlowe to have been acquainted with me. And, after all, what have I done more than prosecute the maxims, by which thou and I, and every Rake are governed, and which, before I knew this lady, we have pursued from pretty girl to pretty girl, as fast as we had set one down, taking another up;—just as the fellows do, with their flying-coaches and flying-horses at a country-fair—With a Who rides next! Who rides next! But here, in the present case, to carry on the volant metaphor (for I must either be merry, or mad), is a pretty little Miss, just come out of her hanging-sleeve coat, brought to buy a pretty little fairing; for the world, Jack, is but a great fair, thou knowest; and, to give thee serious reflection for serious, all its toys but tinselled hobby-horses, gilt gingerbread, squeaking trumpets, painted drums, and so forth.—Now, behold, this pretty little Miss skimming from booth to booth, in a very pretty manner. One pretty little fellow called Wyerly, perhaps; another jiggeting rascal called Biron, a third simpering varlet of the name of Symmes, and a more hideous villain than any of the rest with a long bag under his arm, and parchment settlements tagg'd to his heels, ycleped Solmes; pursue her from raree-show to raree-show, shouldering upon one another at every turning, stopping when she stops, and set a spinning again when she moves.—And thus dangled after, but still in the eye of her watchful guardians, traverses the pretty little Miss thro' the whole fair, equally delighted and delighting: Till at last, taken with the invitation of the lac'd-hat orator, and seeing several pretty little bib-wearers stuck together in the flying-coaches, cutting safely the yielding air, in the One-go-up, the Other-go-down picture of-the-world vehicle, and all with as little fear as wit, is tempted to ride

> next. In then suppose she slily pops, when none of her friends are near her: And if, after two or three ups and downs, her pretty head turns giddy, and she throws herself out of the coach, when at its elevation, and so dashes out her pretty little brains, who can help it!—And would you hang the poor fellow, whose professed trade it was to set the pretty little creatures a flying? 'Tis true, this pretty little Miss, being a very pretty little Miss, being a very much-admired little Miss, being a very good little Miss, who always minded her book, and had passed thro' her samplar-doctrine with high applause; had even stitched out in gaudy propriety of colours, an Abraham offering up Isaac, a Samson and the Philistines, and flowers, and knots, and trees, and the sun and the moon, and the seven stars, all hung up in frames with glasses before them, for the admiration of her future grandchildren: Who likewise was intitled to a very pretty little estate: Who was descended from a pretty little family upwards of one hundred years gentility; which lived in a very pretty little manner, respected a very little on their own accounts, a great deal on hers:—For such a pretty little Miss as this to come to so very great a misfortune, must be a very sad thing: But, tell me, would not the losing of any ordinary child, of any other less considerable family, of less shining or amiable qualities, have been as great and as heavy a loss to that family, as the losing this pretty little Miss to hers? (Richardson, 1985, 971)

Humbert Humbert would applaud. One thinks of that scene in *Lolita*—a lazy Sunday morning in the Ramsdale house, Lo climbing onto Humbert's lap, the feel of her through the silk pajamas, the way Humbert slyly moves and moves until he attains his release, his flood of words. Word spinning is the same for Lovelace—the obsessive phrases coming back again and again. One can almost imagine the demonic look on the laced-hat orator's face as he spins his pretty little miss around the carousel. The pretty little miss's mistake is thinking that she can "stitch out" in "gaudy propriety of colours, an Abraham offering up Isaac, a Samson and the Philistines, and flowers, and knots, and trees, and the sun and the moon, and the seven stars," and hang it all up in "frames with glasses before them, for the admiration of her future grandchildren." Containment turns out to be no match for subversion when subversion is powered by the hot engine of pleasure and desire.

For all his truckling with pleasure, J. M. Coetzee is still the great poet of unease. In his universe, pleasure and desire are always outplayed by suffering. Just as Clarissa and David Lurie are outplayed by the sacrificial narrative in which they unwittingly find themselves, so Abraham and Isaac are outplayed by Job. Jonathan Lamb has made a powerful argument that the story of Job underlies the

most familiar narrative patterns of eighteenth-century writing. The story of Job is really a contest between two modes of expression—Job's cries of pain and the normative, anodyne language of his comforters. The cry of pain is Job's protest against the sort of providential narrative that seeks to stifle his suffering. For Lamb, two of Job's greatest eighteenth-century impersonators are Clarissa and Lovelace, each character containing both the voices of Job and of his comforters, each struggling mightily to convert Job's pain into the sorts of pain-beguiling "lessons" Job's comforters might deliver. Both characters oscillate between the two poles—from pain to the regulative lessons th at clear the pain away and back again. Lamb puts his thesis this way:

> Although Clarissa culls the most passionate of Job's exclamations, such as his longing for death, his curse against the days of his conception and birth, his refusal of spiteful consolation, and his desire that the charges against him might be written in a book or on a rock, Richardson is eager that these should not be mistaken as channels of personal exasperation, and that they should be understood instead as citations of a general triumph over pain and despair (Lamb 1995, 227)

Lamb's Richardson—like Coetzee's givers of "lessons"— is a familiar moralist looking for a smooth story to tell, a figure like Clarissa herself, who prefers almost anything to the truth. All the lesson givers are doomed to wash away on a flood of words—of pain, desire, and narratives unleashed.

And so Coetzee's reading of *Clarissa* is driven by Job's elemental conflict between pain and the narrative reworking of pain. Both David and Lucy are Job figures, but they respond to their disgrace in opposite ways: Lucy goes quiet about her experience. Then she complains that David is acting like one of Job's comforters: "You behave as if everything I do is part of the story of your life. You are the main character, I am a minor character who doesn't make an appearance until halfway through. Well, contrary to what you think, people are not divided into major and minor. I am not minor. I have a life of my own, just as important to me as yours is to you, and in my life I am the one who makes the decisions" (Coetzee 2001, 198). Lucy is wrong. David is the main character, and she, though not minor, only makes her appearance half way through the story. Lucy may not be the best reader of the novel she's in, but like Clarissa, she seems determined to hew to Job's silence in the face of the blandishments of the well-meaning world. Lucy is most like Clarissa in her extreme reticence. About Clarissa, Lovelace says what David might say of Lucy: "Miss Harlowe, indeed, is the only woman in the world, I believe, that can say, in the words of her favourite Job (for I can quote a text as well as she), But it is not so with me" (Lamb 1995, 228). It is not so with me,

says the Job-like Clarissa; the Job-like Lucy says, "contrary to what you think, people are not divided into major and minor. I am not minor. I have a life of my own, just as important to me as yours is to you, and in my life I am the one who makes the decisions."

While David treats Lucy like Job and tries to act like one of her comforters, he too expresses a pain that refuses to be beguiled. While Lucy is silent about her rape, David speaks in a confused, mystified, increasingly incoherent way about his beating. Finally he gives up altogether and writes a comic opera based on the unrequited passion of Byron's mistress, the Contessa Guiccioli. But not Teresa Guiccioli as a passionate young woman; rather, Teresa Guiccioli as a fat-thighed middle-aged *abandonata,* "a dumpy little widow" lamenting her dead lover. David Lurie finds it best to plunk out the line of her cracking voice on a cigar-box banjo. At the end we see him sacrificing his last friend, a crippled yet cheerful dog who loves him, to the killing needle and the crematorium. I agree with Lucy that this whole situation warrants only the most extreme reticence. What can anybody say about this, except that the silent dog feels the disgrace of dying? In Coetzee's universe, the disgraced are either extremely reticent or extremely voluble, but in any case they are unplugged from the ordinary world of human cross talk.

A final eighteenth-century fanatic. On December 7, 2003, Coetzee delivered his Nobel Laureate address in Stockholm. Another eighteenth-century fiction (which perhaps should not have surprised any of Coetzee's devoted readers), the address also takes all of these issues—about suffering and love, about blindness and insight, and about the endless resistance of reasons to being made into lessons—and turns them into an allegory about a novelist and his characters. In the address, Coetzee revives a character he had killed off fifteen years before. That character is Robinson Crusoe, whose death early in *Foe* launched the strange and surprising adventures of the novel's garrulous heroine, Susan Barton. In *Foe,* Barton washes up on Crusoe's island after sailors on her ship mutinied and set her adrift in a small boat. She spends a year on the island with Friday and Crusoe, becoming his lover. They are rescued, but Crusoe dies on the trip home. Crusoe is an unpleasant, secretive old man wearing ape skins, a senescent parent lightly mourned when he dies.

In England, Susan Barton embarks on several quests. She trails after an elusive writer named Daniel Foe, trying to persuade him to write a tale about her adventures on the island. He is not interested in her story and avoids her. She also wants to find out why Friday's tongue is gone. Did Crusoe cut it out? If he did, she could sympathize with him. "There are times when benevolence deserts me

and I use words as the shortest way to subject him to my will. At such times I understand why Crusoe preferred not to disturb his muteness. I understand, that is to say, why a man will choose to be a slave owner" (Coetzee 1987, 60). She yearns to take "the shortest way" with Friday, whose muteness is a terrible act of dissent.[3] In both quests, Susan Barton is thwarted by a young woman who claims to be her daughter, an event that thrusts her out of one of Daniel Foe's narratives (*Robinson Crusoe*) and into another (*Roxana*).

In the Nobel lecture,[4] Crusoe is alive, but there is no sign of Susan Barton. Crusoe is entangled with a new character, somebody he calls "his man." Growing old in Bristol, he receives letters from his man, letters about ducks in Boston, on the coast, who fly to France and Germany to lure the continental ducks back to England with promises of warm weather and fresh ponds, only to get them caught in giant hunting nets (these quisling ducks are known as "duckoys"). His man sends letters about a giant guillotine in Halifax whose blade descends from a high frame, but local custom has it that if the condemned man can get out of the way as the blade falls he can go free. Nobody ever has. Crusoe, meanwhile, keeps two artifacts from the island: his parasol, which kept his skin from turning black (but did not prevent "a sore from the sun that will not heal" on his nose), and his stuffed parrot, Poll, who used to say "Poor Robin" but never "Poor Friday." Crusoe's artifacts are his last meager claims on human recognition.

"His man," we gradually learn, is—perhaps—a character of Crusoe's devising. He is a shape-shifter. He is a "dapper little man with the quick step and the mole upon his chin." One moment he is a manufacturer of roof tiles, the next he is a leather merchant. He is a man of business. He makes a tour of the whole island of Britain. He writes devastating stories about the plague. His man helps Crusoe over his writer's block. He is—though Coetzee does not directly say this—Daniel Defoe.

Crusoe takes "his man's" stories as "figures" for his own terrible isolation on the island. Eventually, he wonders whether he and his man are "figures" for each other: "How are they to be figured, this man and he? As master and slave? As brothers, twin brothers? As comrades in arms? Or as enemies, foes? . . . If he must settle on a likeness for the pair of them, his man and he, he would write that they are like two ships sailing in contrary directions, one west, the other east. Or better, that they are deckhands toiling in the rigging, the one on a ship sailing west, the other on a ship sailing east. Their ships pass close, close enough to hail. But the seas are rough, the weather is stormy: their eyes lashed by the spray, their hands burned by the cordage, they pass each other by, too busy even to wave" (ibid.)

How are they to be figured, his man and he? Who is the character and who the

author? One sails east, the other west; they are so absorbed in their sailing that they fail to notice each other. They are hardly indifferent to each other, but their contact is imaginary, crystallized in a furious emblem of disengagement: "Their eyes lashed by the spray, their hands burned by the cordage."

J. M. Coetzee and the eighteenth-century novel: how are they to be figured? As ambivalent foes? As sailors passing east and west? They are hardly indifferent passersby, but they are as intimate with each other as a novelist and his characters. Imagine that Coetzee is Crusoe and the eighteenth-century novel is Defoe. Each calls the other into being, constructing an image of the other that extends beyond the boundaries of the page. Each image lives outside the other's ken, in the wider scope of his imagination. Each one lives inside the other's head. Without Crusoe, no Defoe. Without Coetzee, no eighteenth-century novel.

The Crusoe story tells us that sublime symbolism has, in Coetzee's imagination, grown to encompass the deepest elements of the novelist's art—narrative, setting, plot, character, even the objects in his fiction. But the Crusoe story tells us something else, too—namely, that the fracture between word and thing has grown to include the whole colonial world. Crusoe and his Man are passing east and west. What kind of figure is this? Obviously, and somewhat less obviously, the points of the compass are a figure for colonialism, a vast many-headed hydra that Coetzee handles with a sustained and subtle blankness. Colonialism, history, white and black, brutality, injustice: of course these are the major elements of Coetzee's fiction. I say of course because, while they pervade the mood of it, Coetzee does not let one face them anywhere straight on. Remember what he said about how his fictions are "pathetic" and "ludicrous" bulwarks against being overwhelmed by suffering. Perhaps the only real defense is to go at the problems obliquely, using small, sharp tools, much in the way an obsessive archaeologist would—except that Coetzee's tools are metaphors, and so to excavate with them means having to excavate them. It is not an unfrustrating exercise. The figures are elusive, stingy, transparent, and nonreferential. They take you places you thought you would never have to go.

Here, for example, is a figure in the same genus as the two men in the rigging. It comes from the end of *Foe.* The novel's unnamed narrator happens upon another shipwreck and finds the dead bodies of Susan Barton and her lover, the ship's captain, "fat as pigs in their white nightclothes." Then the narrator comes to Friday.

> I tug his woolly hair, finger the chain about his throat. "Friday," I say . . . "what is this ship?" But this is not a place of words. Each syllable, as it comes out, is

> caught and filled with water and diffused. This is a place where bodies are their own signs. It is the home of Friday.
>
> He turns and turns till he lies at full length, his face to my face. The skin is tight across his bones, his lips are drawn back. I pass a fingernail across his teeth, trying to find a way in.
>
> His mouth opens. From inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption. It flows up through his body and out upon me; it passes through the cabin, through the wreck; washing the cliffs and shores of the island, it runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth. Soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face. (Coetzee 1987, 157)

The breath running northward and southward to the ends of the earth and the ships passing east and west are metaphors in the same genus. These are colonial figures, figures of disconnection, figures that show how radically people veer away from each other. And yet *Foe*'s narrator denies that they are metaphors at all. "This is a place where bodies are their own signs," the narrator notices, but how can we assess this stance against metaphor? In fact, they contain all the classic elements of allegory. These are figures drawn from Donne's metaphysical stock, a stock developed after the dissociation of sensibility had taken hold and left people with no way of joining signifier and signified. Friday's breath describes compass points at the ends of the earth; the breath flows "out upon me." The breath may be a sign of itself, but in the colonial world of great interpretive disjunction, it becomes a vehicle with a most uncertain tenor. Does the uncertainty come into it because the narrator is unreliable? Because the world is unstable? Because the unstable world makes people turn away from seeing each other? Coetzee's later fiction—and the Nobel speech is just the latest—raises the question of allegory with higher-toned insistence, almost didactically so. And yet meaning itself becomes more elusive, hiding these loudly self-proclaiming figures in ever more doubtful wisps. Colonialism, the world's fractures and injustices, like the dissociation of sensibility before them, have disjoined the possibility of metaphor.

J. M. Coetzee is an African writer. Coetzee's ongoing, intense, obsessive relationship with the eighteenth-century British novel is thus perhaps different from what it would be for a writer born in England or elsewhere in Europe. The British eighteenth-century novel is both foreign and familiar, written in the language of his mother's people, South Africa's colonial elite. Coetzee is thoroughly ambivalent about that language, about his mother, about her people, about South

Africa's British culture, about England. He is also thoroughly ambivalent about his father's family, Afrikaans farmers, descendents of the first Boer settlers and representatives of an often brutal and philistine rural culture that Coetzee deplores.

Like black and white writers all over the continent of Africa, Coetzee descends from a mélange of cultures, messily and often violently intertwined. The critic Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi uses the term *palava* to describe an emerging vernacular literary movement among female Nigerian writers. *Palava* is itself a mixed term. According to Ogunyemi, it means soup. A variant on *palaver,* a term imported from Portuguese traders and slavers in East Africa, it means trading talk. *Palaver* also means *dispute, contest, trouble (OED)*. Ogunyemi shows that the feminist literary movement in Nigeria has consciously sought to redefine *palava* to mean conciliation rather than confrontation (soup rather than trouble) (Ogunyemi 1995, passim).

Coetzee finds no solace in the claim neoindigenousness. As he often slyly indicates, neoindigenousness has become a cliché for black African writers. Let me return again to Elizabeth Costello's encounter with the novelist Emmanuel Egudu, lecturing on the cruise ship. Egudu has an easy way about him. He is glib and passionate about voice and song, about preferring the living voice to the dead text. He is a believer, a showman. He thrills the passengers. He seduces an aging Russian chanteuse. Elizabeth Costello, by contrast, delivers a lecture consisting of some abstractions and ends by scolding her audience. They find her boring and too severe. They don't understand her dry arguments or her animosity. They are polite but cold. They fawn instead over Egudu.

Egudu seems like a parody, perhaps a blend. His name suggests Romanus Egudu, a scholar of West African literature and oral culture. But the facts of his life suggest the great Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe (who is the subject of one of Romanus Egudu's most influential essays). Like Achebe, Emmanuel Egudu is the author of a single highly acclaimed novel and some lesser fiction. Like Achebe, Egudu has made a good living representing the claims of African indigenousness in Western institutions (a cruise ship!). Many of Achebe's ideas, from the essays he wrote in the 1970s, are circulated as Egudu's own.

There is also a subtle, but important, moment of "palaver" in *Disgrace.* After Lucy's rape and David's exile from her farm, David returns to find Lucy pregnant. He has long suspected that Petrus, Lucy's farmhand who is slowly buying her out, sponsored the attack to drive her off the land. Now David confronts Petrus: "Petrus is glazing windows. There is a long palaver of greetings that ought to be gone through, but he is in no mood for it" (Coetzee 1999, 201). Soon after this,

their simmering conflict breaks out in earnest. The long palaver of greetings is a chance at peace foregone. Palaver suggests a degree of comfort, ordinariness, trust, light, ease, and contentment. But none of these values holds. For Coetzee's characters the only alternative to palaver is to be the Foe.

I try to imagine the scene at the Swedish academy lecture as Coetzee stood up like a prophet and brought his latest eighteenth-century fanatic to life. Famous elegant people in black tie sit in a darkened auditorium after a rich warm dinner and a few glasses of wine. Coetzee lectures in English; the audience listens to a simultaneous Swedish translation. What could they have made of this story? What, for example, is the Swedish word for "duckoy"? And what do you do if you are immersed in the social world—if you are ordinary, prosperous, content, literary, and high-minded—when you encounter a fanatic who tells you that your world of reasons is no world to him?

# *Epilogue*

When I was writing this book, I often worried that I was becoming like Mr. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice.* Mr. Bennet, the weak and conflict-averse father of five young women, one of whom runs off with an army officer and imperils her elder sisters' chances of marriage, is an emotional voyeur. He sits in his study chuckling at human absurdity. He enjoys it when his cousin Mr. Collins "was as absurd as he had hoped, and he listened to him with the keenest enjoyment, maintaining at the same time the most resolute composure of countenance" (Austen 2002, 67). An Erasmian connoisseur of human folly, he begins with the person closest to him, his wife: "To his wife he was very little otherwise indebted, than as her ignorance and folly had contributed to his amusement. This is not the sort of happiness which a man would in general wish to owe to his wife; but where other powers of entertainment are wanting, the true philosopher will derive benefit from such as are given" (228).

Identification is a tricky thing. I will admit to identifying with Mr. Bennet. I enjoy the human comedy a little too much from the safety of my chair. I have used Mr. Bennet's thoughts as my own. I once revenged myself on a frustrating and intrusive boss by mocking him behind his back as Mr. Collins, a view I shared with my Austen-loving co-workers. But in my own defense, surely everyone who has ever read *Pride and Prejudice* has had similar thoughts about some officious creature they know. So what has Jane Austen given us? A defense mechanism, a tool to think with, a path through the thicket, a shorthand, a satirical device, a rule of thumb, a way to sit home in our chairs and work it all out?

In life as in literature: thoughts of Mr. Collins are never satisfying for very long because they immediately raise a host of troubling questions. If I settle in too comfortably to view the world from Mr. Bennet's slightly mocking distance, do I not also have to take on the full range of his failures as well as his delights? The world of the armchair philosopher, like Kafka's limited circle, is pure. If I commit myself wholeheartedly to his point of view, I might discover that my choice of the contemplative over the active life sometimes leads me to disappoint the people

who depend on me, just as Mr. Bennet disappoints his daughter Elizabeth. He disappoints her, no less, on the one point for which she holds him in highest esteem—his paternal affections:

> Elizabeth, however, had never been blind to the impropriety of her father's behaviour as a husband. She had always seen it with pain; but respecting his abilities, and grateful for his affectionate treatment of herself, she endeavoured to forget what she could not overlook, and to banish from her thoughts that continual breach of conjugal obligation and decorum which, in exposing his wife to the contempt of her own children, was so highly reprehensible. But she had never felt so strongly as now, the disadvantages which must attend the children of so unsuitable a marriage. (Ibid., 228)

"Disadvantages"—"unsuitable"—these words, like Augusta Elton's "deficiencies" in the final lines of *Emma,* are the distant traces of suppressed conflict. For Elizabeth, those disadvantages lead her to take action on her own behalf—or, really, to find better men than her father (such as Darcy and her uncle Gardner) to take action for her. But if I drill down too far into Mr. Bennet's deficiencies, enjoying the world from his vantage point becomes all the more difficult. In thinking about Mr. Bennet I have a choice between thinking a little bit, which is just fine, and thinking too much, which isn't. In literature, as in life: Daniel Kahnemann was right when he said that "people are not accustomed to thinking hard, and are often content to trust a plausible judgment that quickly comes to mind." This is not meant as a criticism. We should be content to trust a plausible judgment that comes floating by—the odds are good that it will work out well enough. But here's the rub: literary characters—and I mean self-consciously literary, as distinct from the people who appear flickeringly in the jittery sweep of the media spotlight—skew those odds against us. They mire the plausible-looking judgment in mental quicksand, which grips all the tighter the more we struggle.

All of which must put some strain on the well-worn but (to me) still appealing idea that literary characters are tools to think with, an idea that I have tried at length to flesh out in this book. Though intuitively true (think of how often a literary character stands as cultural shorthand for some collective judgment), literary characters are most effective as tools when they are flattened beyond recognition. At the heart of my argument is, I believe, a deep tension between flat and round, between use and value. Ernst Cassirer perfectly captured our sense of cognitive ambivalence towards fictional characters—our modern gods—when he wrote, in the 1950s, "for man does not simply transfer his own finished personality to the god or simply lend him his own feeling and consciousness of himself; it is

rather through the figure of his gods that man first finds this self-consciousness" (Cassirer and Hendel 1953, 211).

Throughout this book I have tried to describe some of the hooks that literary authors use to capture our interest by appealing to our mind-reading capacities. To ground this idea, I turned first to the Machiavellian intelligence hypothesis (the idea that our intelligence evolved in relation to other people and that much of it is attuned to managing our social alliances) and more distantly to evolutionary literary criticism, especially the work of Joseph Carroll. His view, once again, is that the arts are a device we use to help us set our emotional compasses correctly:

> Literature and the other arts provide paradigmatic and emotionally saturated images of the world and of human experience, and it is through these images that people come to understand the emotional quality of the motives available to them.
>
> . . . Their chief psychological function is to serve as instruments of subjective orientation—orientation in attitudes, emotional responses, values, and beliefs. Along with myth, religion, and ideology, the arts are a chief means through which humans organize their complex motivational dispositions and thus channel their own evolved motive dispositions into a functional program of behavior. By entering an author's imaginative universe, readers participate vicariously in the author's realized act of motivational orientation. (Carroll 2006, 43)

So if the arts are the means by which humans orient themselves to other people's behavior, the techniques I have been stressing here—techniques through which authors focus our mind-reading skills—are the orienteering devices themselves, the telescopes and the maps.

But how can we reconcile these two points of view? Literary characters are quicksand; they are telescopes. They mire us down; they give us perspective. To use a slightly different critical vocabulary, the symbolic (inward) and allegorical (outward) aspects of literary characters are somewhat at odds. When literary characters are deeper and more resonant, they inevitably become less useful for making sense of the masses of ambient information in culture. Yet all this tension between depth and use, between symbol and allegory, raises a question: What happens when people get overly focused on the orienteering devices themselves, on the map rather than the road, on the telescope rather than the distant planet? Some readers will recognize this question as a version of the charge that art has

had to answer since philosophy first got art in its sights. As Socrates put it to the hapless rhapsode Ion in Plato's dialogue, What does it mean to be more interested in a representation of something than in the thing itself? (Ion, of course, had no answer).

Even if it cannot be answered, literature opens to us an awareness that such a question cannot be evaded. Literary theorists from Joseph Addison to Paul de Man have noticed (and reacted to) a certain feeling of suspension in our judgments about fiction, in particular. Whether the suspension is willing or unwilling, it is one of fiction's most salient effects. Some fiction goes to great lengths to exploit our feeling of being not quite fully absorbed in it, even when we are. Modernist fiction, in particular, a line running from Kafka to Coetzee, often makes jokes about how unabsorbed its readers are—and at times, about how unabsorbed its characters are. It uses interruption and suspension to confirm our sense of interruption and suspension, sometimes in a comically literal way. In *Slow Man* (2005) Elizabeth Costello reappears, but now she is a rather ambiguous and clumsy stand-in for the author himself. J. M. Coetzee has his two main characters wonder why Elizabeth Costello is always breaking in on them. She is a novelist, and she has set them up alone together in a room, practically demanding that they make love. They find her annoying. Why doesn't she just let them get on with their business? She interrupts them to do things to them, the sorts of things that Jesus did to the blind and the halt (though they can't see that).

Coetzee is the wittiest major novelist at work today. He knows how cliché-ridden the topic of literary characters has been. Writers pass around the same sayings from hand to hand, unquestioningly. One cliché is that an author's characters lead independent lives: they get out of hand, step off the page, come alive, surprise the author by doing things he never intended. A related cliché comes from the reader's camp. I heard it just the other day in a restaurant in San Francisco. Two sweet-looking gay men sitting near me were talking about Jeffrey Eugenides's novel *Middlesex*. One said to the other, "I just didn't want it to end. I loved the main character so much that I felt sad about saying goodbye." This sentiment was everywhere in *Middlesex*'s reviews and blurbs: "*Middlesex* is a modern fairy tale with a very beguiling narrator, delving so richly into the inner lives of its characters it's hard to let them go," wrote a reviewer on the BBC website.[1] As it happens, delving into the inner life of a character is a perfect mind-reading trope. Inwardness, penetration, and knowing are all elements of the way we represent mind reading. And mind reading has something to do with what it means to be absorbing. In any case, these clichés about literary characters, even when

they are heartfelt, amount to a claim against suspension. So Coetzee, making his own counterclaim in favor of suspension, creates a novelist who noisily impedes her characters' free will.

The feelings of absorption and suspension are each so integral to the core experience of fiction that the contest between them will never be unwound. Nonetheless, sides have been taken and lines have been drawn, as I have suggested, along an axis of sophistication. Literary studies have had a strong trump card to play—Don't you realize that you can't talk about fictional characters the way you do about real people?—as though it were the most obvious distinction in the world. The trump card gets played rather aggressively when some scholar tries to breach the distinction.[2] Literary theory has been strongly committed to the idea that there is a difference between the way we ought to consider fictional characters and the way we ought to consider real people—indeed, its purifying origin myth now depends on keeping ideal Apollo out of the clutches of the Falstaffian Dionysius. What Wayne Booth called ethical criticism—criticism that addresses itself to the importance of what people care about—is as much a distant ideal now as it was in 1988, when he published his great book *The Company We Keep.*

But, pace Richard Rorty, my opinion about what literary theory should or should not be paying attention to is of no consequence. Literary theory and criticism are profoundly, irreducibly pluralist. One effect of this pluralism is that literary critics are becoming increasingly interested in and accepting of scientific methods. Suzanne Keen, a prominent mainstream narrative theorist, is now seeking to place the study of narrative empathy on firmly scientific grounds. She nominates a series of topics that she says are likely to be resolved not by theorizing but by compiling data and running studies. These are:

> What effect (if any) does consonance (relative closeness to the related events) and dissonance (greater distance between the happening and the telling) have on readers of first person, self-narrated fictions? Does a plural, communal narrative voice, a "we" narration, bring the reader into a perceptive circle where empathetic reactions are more readily available? Does the use of second person "you" narration enhance the intimacy of the reading experience by drawing the reader and narrator close, or does it emphasize dissonance as it becomes clear that "you" can't include the reader? In third person fiction, does the use of a figural reflector, rather than an authorial (omniscient) narrator make any difference in readers' emotional responsiveness to situations and characters? Does the location of the narrator inside (or outside) the story-world effect readers'

> reactions to the content of the narration? Does a covert narrator, who scarcely does more than provide cues about characters' movements and speech, disinvite empathy for those characters, or invite readers to see the action with a greater sense of immediacy, as if it were a play . . . ? In the most fully polyphonic novels, in which a single narrative perspective is simply not available to the reader, does readers' empathy increase, dwindle, or vary according to the page they are on? (Keen 2006, 225)

These are all excellent questions, questions that go to the heart of people's experience of narrative. Keen thus joins a movement that I see growing in strength every year, a movement towards understanding literary experience not as some ineffable mystery transmitted from on high by a quasi-secular priesthood but as a human phenomenon that can be tested, measured, and defined in ever more precise terms.[3] I admit, perhaps ruefully, that my own study has relied on a method that might be called *palpitational* rather than empirical: I have palpated my way around a topic that I see as absolutely crucial to literary experience and to the experience of social life generally—namely, mind reading. My own palpitational method is perhaps different, though, from the rigorously scientific studies of fiction that are now being written and will be written in the future, in that I have tried to hew closely to the phenomenological feeling of mind reading in the texts I have chosen and in the imagined worlds of their authors. I have tried, in other words, to keep my reader in the company of flesh and blood.

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## *Chapter 1 · The Fictional among Us*

1. I have stolen this conceit from Matt Ridley (1994, 25).

2. This is my interpretation of a certain way of thinking of Schadenfreude as among a limited group of cognitively complex emotions—call them emotion-scenarios—that correlate closely with familiar narrative scenarios. See Wierzbicka 1999.

3. See Brown and Duguid 2000, chap. 1.

4. The book trade experienced a "steep take-off curve after about 1740," according to James Raven, the historian who has studied the data most intensively. "About 1700 different titles were issued in 1660, just over 2000 in 1700, but almost 4000 in 1780" (Raven 2005, 15–16). The data he has compiled from the Eighteenth-Century Short Title Catalogue (ESTC) shows a steady uptrend into the 1770s and a parabolic spike upwards thereafter (Raven 1992). Prose fiction went through its own volume spikes after 1770. Much of this expansion was caused by rising population and literacy levels, as well as by the rise of effective cartels or oligopolies among the booksellers (Raven 2005). The main drivers of the book trade expansion were economic, not aesthetic; nevertheless, with their newfound brutal efficiency, the booksellers unleashed upon the literate world a great wash of fictional prose narratives.

5. Some literary critics have always protested against the pleasure-killing tone of literary skepticism: in 1983, at the height of the American embrace of French theory, Peter Brooks introduced a special issue of *Poetics Today* dedicated to fiction and reference by noting, rather ruefully, that he saw "a certain yearning for the return of the referent" under a regime of formalism that had—"in a possibly abusive transformation of an analytic principle into a critical ideology—declared the question of the referent to be illegitimate" (Brooks 1983, 73). Now, in 2007, French theory has receded somewhat, as have other kinds of formalisms, but nonetheless "a certain yearning for the return of the referent" remains very much in place.

## *Chapter 2 · The Cognitive Dimension*

1. I heard the philosopher John Searle use this example once in a lecture.

2. Bruce McConachie, *Cognitive Studies and Performance,* forthcoming from Palgrave.

3. One problem with the simulation view of imagination is that it doesn't allow for imagination of things in the past or imagination linked to memory; neither strategy testing nor empathizing can fully account for nonoccurrent imagination. (I am grateful to Lanier Anderson for this observation.) Neither can they account for the central role of the visual image in our intuitions about what imagination is.

## *Chapter 4 · The Literary Endowment*

1. An interesting topic, but not one I will not pursue here, is how frequently Conan Doyle nudges his readers into thinking the two men have a sexual relationship before moving to a different outcome. A gay affair would, in many cases, turn out to be the simplest explanation of the mystery at hand. A classic case in point is "The Adventure of Wysteria Lodge" (1908). In *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,* Robert Louis Stevenson similarly raises the specter of a gay relationship between Henry Jekyll and Edward Hyde, noting, for example, how often servants were appalled to find Edward sneaking out of Henry Jekyll's house early in the morning.

2. I am grateful to a presentation by Sue Curry at Indiana University, Bloomington, in September 2005, for bringing the passage from *The Aeneid* and Michael Putnam's book to my attention.

3. I am indebted to Natalie Philips, a Ph.D. candidate at Stanford University, for shaping my thinking on this important topic. See her forthcoming article "Distraction as Liveliness of Mind: A Cognitive Approach to Characterization in Jane Austen."

## *Chapter 5 · The Fantasy of Exposure and Narrative Development in Eighteenth-Century Britain*

1. I am indebted to Jill Campbell for this observation.

## *Chapter 6 · God Novels*

1. Throughout this essay, I rely on Pascal Boyer's brilliant and thought-provoking book *Religion Explained.* I have tried to be scrupulous in my acknowledgment of his influence, but I may have missed the way that certain phrases and habits of thought creep in. For example, the notion of a full-access strategic agent is his; he develops it most fully in *Religion Explained.*

## *Chapter 7 · Gossip and Literary Narratives*

1. I am indebted to Jonathan Freedman's unpublished article, "Information Wants to Be Free": Insider Trading, Blackmail, and the Racialization of Knowledge in *The House of Mirth* and *The Great Gatsby,*" for my understanding of the novel's gossip economy; Freedman also makes this point about Grace Stepney.

### *Chapter 8 · What's the Matter with Miss Bates?*

1. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_cognitive_biases#Social_biases.
2. I am indebted to a long ago class with D. A. Miller for this observation.

### *Chapter 9 · Mind Blindness*

1. See www.feralchildren.com/en/autism.php.

### *Chapter 10 · Postmodernism Reflects*

1. This chapter was inspired by Jonathan Lamb, who generously shared with me his brilliant paper "Gulliver and the Lives of Animals." I owe thanks as well to Brad Pasenak, who equally generously made available his notes from J. M. Coetzee's Stanford graduate seminar on *Clarissa.* Although I cite neither of these texts directly, they are woven very deeply into the fabric of this piece, so let me acknowledge the debts forthrightly here.
2. Wikipedia entry on "Satisficing" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page).
3. In 1702, at the height of worries about the "occasional conformity" of dissenting Protestants, Daniel Defoe anonymously published a pamphlet, *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters,* advocating that the dissenters simply be exterminated. The pamphlet was satirical—Defoe moved in dissenting Protestant circles—but too effectively so; he was prosecuted for seditious libel and made to stand three times in the pillory.
4. Coetzee's Nobel lecture can be accessed at http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2003/coetzee-lecture-e.htmla.

### *Epilogue*

1. www.bbc.co.uk/dna/collective/A843176.
2. The critical response to Martha Nussbaum's 1990 book *Love's Knowledge* is a case in point. One reviewer predicted that "literary critics will regard her approach to reading literature—knowingly naïve—as deeply unsatisfactory. . . . While it would be absurd to suggest that Nussbaum is unaware of the differences between life and art, between living and reading, or between real people and fictional characters, she sometimes seems insufficiently attentive to these differences. It may be illuminating on occasion to speak of novels as 'friends' or of 'falling in love' with fictional characters, but these metaphors also carry with them real dangers" (Horton 1992, 74). *Dangers?*
3. See the excellent book by Jonathan Gottschall, forthcoming from Palgrave, called *Shrinking the Space of Possible Explanation in Literary Studies,* and "Graphing Jane Austen," by Joseph Carroll, Jonathan Gottschall, John Johnson, and Daniel Kruger, in preparation.

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